



Sword of the Demon Hunter

KUIN
GENTOSHŌ

BOOK 2

BY Motoo Nakanishi



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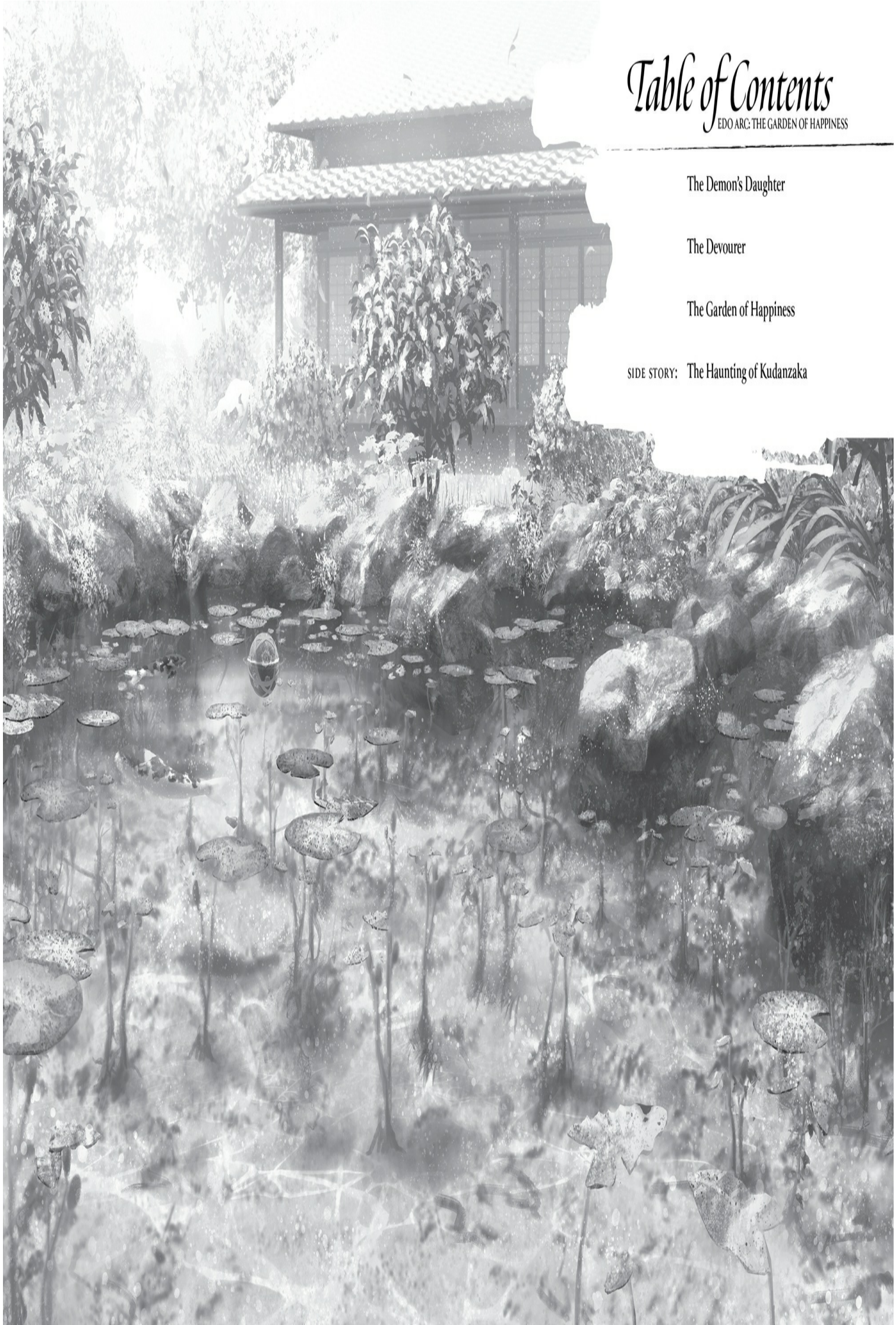


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A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a large, textured, curved object, possibly a piece of wood or a large shell, with a dark, irregular shape on its surface. The object is illuminated from the left, creating a bright, curved highlight that follows its contour. The rest of the object and the background are in deep shadow, appearing almost black. The texture of the surface is visible, showing fine lines and grain. The overall composition is abstract and dramatic.

The Edo Arc

The Demon's Daughter

1

WHO'S TO SAY when exactly the rumors of demon sightings first began?

In year eight of the Tenpo Era (1837 AD), an American vessel named *Morrison* attempted to forcibly enter Uruga Port. This incident was soon followed by an unauthorized land survey of Yaeyama, part of the Ryukyu Islands, by British vessel *Samarang* in year fourteen of the Tenpo Era (1843 AD). No more than a year later, the French vessel *Alcmene* docked at Naha Port. Things were looking grim for the island nation and its long-held stance of self-isolation from the outside world.

It was now autumn in the third year of the Kaei Era (1850 AD). The shadows of foreign influence lurked at the borders, and the Tokugawa shogunate government was helpless against the situation. Unease ate at the hearts of the people, which was perhaps to blame for the rumors of demon sightings in Edo.

Of course, these kinds of rumors were nothing new, for Edo has always been a capital of many chilling tales. There was the tale of the demon woman who went mad with jealousy, or of the ghost beneath the willow, or the nightly processions of assorted spirits. Countless such stories were told here. That being said, an unusual number of them seemed to be told as firsthand accounts over the past few years...

Regardless, mere rumors could not meaningfully change a way of life. Everyone went about their days as they always had, just with a little more unease in their hearts.

Deep down, however, a faint understanding lingered. An end was approaching.

Ten years had passed since Jinya departed Kadono.

At the youthful age of ten, Zenji began life as a live-in apprentice at Sugaya, a

shop along the main street of Nihonbashi, a big commercial district in Edo. Initially tasked with running errands and other menial chores, he was finally allowed to conduct business himself upon turning twenty. He quickly proved himself capable, with his affable nature and strong working relationships with wholesale dealers and customers. It seemed likely he'd take over as manager of the shop one day.

"Pleasure doing business with you. I hope to work with you next time as well."

"The same. I can always count on a fair deal with you, Zenji."

The side streets of Nihonbashi were full of shops that were just as busy as those on the main street. Zenji came to such a shop early one morning to meet the proprietor of a wholesale dealer. Sugaya sold trinkets like hair ornaments, combs, netsuke sculptures, handheld fans, and more. Sometimes these items would be individually commissioned from craftsmen, and other times they'd be ordered in bulk from wholesalers. Zenji, a frequent business partner of these side-street wholesalers, had a close relationship with their proprietors.

"Just out of curiosity, are you by chance familiar with Senkendou Kuzaemon?" the man asked Zenji.

"That woodblock print shop out in Tenmachou? Yeah, I know it—I go there myself quite a bit."

"Oh, is that right? Well, they got some new kagama nude prints in, and, whew, let me tell you, they're *really* something."

"Ah... Sorry, but like I've said, that stuff ain't my kinda thing..."

Of course, the closer two people got, the more personal their conversations became. As a man, Zenji was no stranger to pornography. But pornography of kagama—that is to say, male prostitutes—was not quite his speed.

"Well, I'll be off then."

With a polite smile, Zenji excused himself and left the side street behind. He planned to return to the shop and eat, being famished from working all morning. He hummed as he sauntered down the street, wondering what the meal should be. When he reached the shop, however, he came to a halt, noticing that something was off.

Sugaya was a relatively large shop whose living space and store shared an entrance. The entrance was typically kept open for the store's operations, but for some reason it was now closed, despite it being working hours.

Now, that's odd, Zenji thought. He tried the entrance and found it unlocked. Slowly, he slid it slightly open and peered through the gap. There were two men inside. One was a familiar face, Jyuuzou, the owner of Sugaya. The other was a stranger around six shaku¹ in height, far taller than average. Zenji himself was only around five shaku tall, which meant the man was a full head taller than him. The man looked fairly slender, but his kimono was tight around the shoulders, hinting at the muscle underneath.

What are they talking about? Zenji wondered. The man's kimono looked fairly clean, but he had a tachi sword at his waist. Yet he lacked a topknot, his long hair instead messily tied back and touching his shoulders. No self-respecting samurai would have their hair like that, which meant the man was, at best, someone from a particularly unruly samurai family or, at worst, a ronin—a masterless samurai.

Zenji's mind immediately went to thoughts of extortion or robbery, but the man didn't seem to be threatening anything. Did they know each other, then? But what would a shop owner and the likes of a ronin have to do with one another that would be worth closing the shop for?

Zenji figured he'd stay to watch through the door gap for the time being, when suddenly the tall man glanced his way and made eye contact. Zenji lurched in shock, and a cold sweat ran down his back. The tall man furrowed his brows slightly. He looked youthful, but he clearly hadn't lived what most would consider *a proper life*. His gaze was piercing as steel.

"Somebody you know?" the man asked in a deep voice.

Jyuuzou looked over. Seeing no point in hiding anymore, Zenji forced a smile and slid the door open, saying, "Aha ha, hello. I hope I'm not barging in on anything." He entered the shop, bowing his head profusely and feeling like he'd rather be anywhere else.

"I see you've returned," Jyuuzou said, in his usual gravelly voice.

Jyuuzou, the proprietor of Sugaya. Unlike many who inherited their business, he was a first-generation owner who still ran his store himself despite pushing fifty. His brow was lined with years of hard-earned creases, and he always had a stern look on his face.

“Ah, yes. Yes, I have.” Zenji said. He breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing that his boss wasn’t angry at him for eavesdropping. “Uh... May I ask who this might be?”

The creases in Jyuuzou’s brow deepened. “A ronin I just hired.”

“Come again?” Zenji couldn’t believe his ears. “Uh, as in, hired for the store?”

“Don’t be an idiot. What good would an uneducated ronin be here?”

Zenji glanced at the tall man, scared that Jyuuzou’s words might have offended him, but the man’s expression was flat. Zenji had heard ronin were the rough and violent sort, but this man was calm and collected. He looked to be only seventeen or eighteen years of age, younger than Zenji.

“He’s for Natsu,” Jyuuzou continued. “Apparently this ronin is half-decent with a sword.”

“For Natsu...?”

Natsu was Jyuuzou’s daughter—non-blood-related daughter, that was. Shortly after she was born, her family met with great misfortune and left her orphaned, after which she was adopted by Jyuuzou. The two looked nothing alike, but Jyuuzou doted on her all the same, allowing her to get away with most of her selfish whims.

“Ah, for *that*?” Zenji said, now understanding. Jyuuzou firmly nodded in response. The ronin was to be Natsu’s bodyguard, then.

“Natsu and I may not be related by blood, but I treasure her as much as I would my own child. Protect her well,” Jyuuzou soberly said to the ronin. His tone was a little rough, even considering he was the client, but the ronin took no offense and nodded silently in return. Pleased by that, the edges of Jyuuzou’s lips curved up slightly—a rare sight. “Zenji, you fill him in on the particulars.”

“Huh? But isn’t that normally the client’s job?”

“Do it.”

“...Yes, sir.” Zenji relented, albeit with some reluctance. There was simply no going against the boss’s orders.

That settled, Jyuuzou retreated further into the building, a half smile lingering on his face and more spring to his step than usual. Seeing no point in sulking about the extra work, Zenji turned to face the ronin, who had been patiently waiting for the two to finish talking. “Sorry about that. Boss man always comes off a bit strong, but he’s actually a really nice guy. Oh, I’m Zenji, by the way. I work here at Sugaya.”

“Jinya. A pleasure.”

Zenji found himself surprised yet again by how his image of a ronin differed from the one who stood before him. Not all ronin were rogues and thugs, it seemed. There was a certain curtness to the young man, certainly, but it was laudable how he at least met the bare minimum of social etiquette.

“Nice to meet ya, Jinya. So, how much has my boss filled you in on?”

“Not much. All I know is that I’m to slay a demon that might attack his daughter.”

“Ah...” Zenji let out an exasperated sigh, thinking, *Oh, that boss of mine...* Jyuuzou had openly mentioned that his daughter was adopted, a relatively private matter, but had hardly discussed the actual job request itself. “He’s told you basically nothing then. Well, to put it shortly, your job is to protect Miss Natsu.”

“Natsu being your boss’s daughter?”

“Yep. She turned thirteen just this year. She’s a cute thing, albeit a little bratty. As you’ve heard, she isn’t related to the boss by blood.”

“What happened to her parents?”

“They passed away less than a year after her birth. That’s when the boss took her in. Anyway, you’ve been hired because Miss Natsu claims a demon appears before her every night.”

The day before, Natsu had abruptly made that claim. At first, it appeared as a faint, dark silhouette on the thin paper of her room's sliding door, the one facing the courtyard. Thinking it only a dream, she dismissed what she saw. The night after, however, the silhouette grew larger, presumably having moved closer. The silhouette clearly took a humanoid shape too, so she believed it to be a demon. On the third day, yesterday, she told her father of the demon. Jyuuzou simply frowned and vaguely promised to assign her protection. At night, the demon reappeared, this time with a guttural growl, followed by an unmistakable vocalization in a deep, bone-chilling cry: "RETURN... ME... DAUGHTER."

"Return...me...daughter...?" Jinya repeated.

"Yeah. It seems the demon thinks Miss Natsu is their daughter and is trying to kidnap her."

The idea of a demon wanting a daughter sounded ridiculous, even more than the average ghost story. But Jinya didn't scoff at the account like Zenji had expected, staying deep in thought instead.

"And there you have it," Zenji said. "I can't say if any demon will actually appear, but having you around will at least give the boss and Miss Natsu some peace of mind."

"I see. I take it you don't believe the girl's story much?"

"Huh? Oh, uh... No, I guess I really don't." Natsu's story was hard to take seriously. Zenji was a live-in employee, but he himself hadn't heard or seen any demon the night before. Not to mention that Natsu was only thirteen: not quite a young child, but still at an age where one wanted their father's attention. In all likelihood, this was just a fib to get Jyuuzou to dote on her some more. "B-but it doesn't really matter what I think. It's all about keeping Miss Natsu safe. ...Got to say though, I'm a bit surprised—I didn't think the boss would hire a ronin of all people, with how protective he is of his daughter."

"Isn't it precisely because I'm a ronin that he hired me? He can't very well go to the magistrate's office and ask a samurai to help with his demon problems."

"Ahhh, right." Bluntly put, the only people who would take such a ridiculous job were ronin, who were fine doing pretty much anything for money. "Sorry,

my phrasing was a bit rude there. I didn't mean any offense, just a bit surprised given my boss's personality."

"No offense taken."

Jinya had now been slighted twice after that first insult by Jyuuzou, yet he still showed no sign of caring. Perhaps he simply wasn't showing his anger, or perhaps he really was just that levelheaded. In any case, Zenji was glad the ronin hired was this one. Despite being the daughter of a well-off family, Natsu was—to put it gently—not very ladylike. To put it more bluntly, she was bratty and had a sharp tongue. She'd drive a quick-tempered ronin mad, but Zenji believed he could at least trust Jinya not to quit halfway through.

"Good to hear," Zenji said. "You don't have to be so formal, by the way. I prefer keeping things light."

"Are you certain? Shouldn't I be treating you with respect, seeing as you're past apprenticeship?"

"No, no, I'm still just a bit player in the business. The only reason I got chosen for apprenticeship in the first place was because there weren't many other kids around. There's nothing special about me."

"I do not think your boss is the kind of man to choose an apprentice for such a reason."

"Mmm, perhaps. I guess there's such a thing as being too modest, huh? Whatever, just feel free to ease up with me."

It was true that Zenji wanted Jinya to speak more freely because he preferred to, as he put it, keep things light, but it was also because he had simply come to like the ronin. Jinya was a bit hesitant to do as Zenji suggested, but he eventually nodded. "I will do just that then."

"Still a little stiff, but it'll do. All right, 'nuff talking, let's go see Miss Natsu now."

"*Zenjiiii!*" The voice of a young girl echoed through the shop.

"Er, scratch that. It seems she's come to us."

The two men looked in the direction of the voice and saw a young girl in a

quality, madder-red kimono standing with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face.

“I’ve returned, Miss Natsu,” Zenji said.

“You’re late! Didn’t I tell you to be back early?” She had an attitude—as she always did—and spoke commandingly to Zenji, her elder. The employees of Sugaya had a tough time with her bratty and sharp-tongued attitude, but Zenji didn’t mind her barbed words.

“Oh please, you’re not my mother,” he said. “And I’ll have you know I was out doing proper work.”

“Are you talking back to me?” She glowered.

“No, no.” He grinned wryly, thinking about how she took after her father, despite the lack of a blood relation. Natsu had turned thirteen just this year. While she could be a bit much sometimes, Zenji had known her since childhood and thought of her as nothing more than a bratty little sister. She didn’t let being the daughter of an affluent merchant get to her head and didn’t look down on the young apprentices of the shop. Her words were scathing at times, but Zenji knew she was a kind girl at heart.

“Who’s that? He doesn’t look like a customer.”

She was glancing suspiciously at Jinya. By no fault of his own, he looked the very image of a ronin. Ronin were typically without stable work and—by extension—penniless, so there likely wasn’t much he could do to improve his appearance.

“Ah, right. Your father hired this man to protect you,” Zenji answered.

“This guy?”

“That’s right.”

“Why’s he so young?”

“Er... Age aside, your father claims he’s skilled with the sword.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes.” Zenji left out the fact Jyuuzou hadn’t actually seen Jinya’s sword

skills firsthand. There was no reason to make Natsu any more distrustful, after all.

Sadly, it didn't matter. "Well, I don't need him. Send him away," she said, turning her head.

"Huh? Uh, are you sure?"

"I'm sure. He'll have to stay with me to protect me, right? Well, I don't want to spend a single second with such a rough-looking sort. I bet he only took this dubious job for the money anyway. Well, sorry, but I've got no money to give to the likes of you!"

"Er, you're not the one paying, you know... Besides, your father chose him personally, so I doubt he's the ruffian you think. And wait, you were aware your whole story sounded dubious?"

"Oh, be quiet! Why'd you have to be such a nag?! I said I don't want no stinking ronin guarding me, and that's that!"

She could be just as forceful as her father. As someone under the family's employ, Zenji found it hard to admonish her.

"But your father *is* worried for you, you know..."

"Then you can protect me instead."

"Er, well, I'm really weak, so..."

"Fine, then don't. I don't care. Just get rid of that guy." She puffed out her cheeks and left the room.

The two men stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do. The girl's uncompromising mentality was just like her father's, so much so that even Jinya—though still expressionless—had to sigh. Whether he sighed out of exasperation or astonishment however, Zenji could not tell.

"The two really are alike, despite not being blood related," Jinya mused.

"Sorry about that... Again."

Good grief, Zenji thought. There was nothing he could do but smile dryly about it.

The streets of Edo turned eerie once night fell. The city went silent, as still as death.

It was the dead of night now, but Natsu was still awake. She sat on her bed and hugged her knees. She had holed herself up in her room after dinner but couldn't catch any sleep at all. If anything, she only grew more wakeful as the sky darkened and her worry grew. She thought of the demon and its surely hideous figure, its silhouette growing bigger against her screen door with each passing night. Would the demon not reach her room this time? Just the thought alone made her tremble.

Natsu was considered bratty and bullheaded by many, but she was really nothing more than a normal thirteen-year-old girl. She was not as brave as she acted and was afraid of being alone, since she was orphaned before she could even remember. She had Jyuuzou as her family now, but she was afraid he'd one day leave her as well. However, she was ashamed of her own fears, so she hid them under a veil of haughty arrogance, accepting that it would mean nobody would like her. This was the true identity of Natsu, a girl who hid the deep anxieties she harbored.

"Miss Natsu?" A familiar voice interrupted her brooding thoughts.

"Zenji?"

She could make out a silhouette through the paper sliding door. The voice belonged to Zenji, a man who came to Sugaya when she was four. She had known him since he was still a clueless apprentice, and he was one of the few people who worried for her and didn't get angry when on the receiving end of her scathing words. He was a bit of a bore in some respects, but he was easy to talk to and made for good company. She thought of him as a brother figure, though she'd never openly admit that to him.

"What're you doing still awake?" he asked.

"What're *you* doing still awake? Do you have any idea how late it is?"

"Oh, uh, I figured I'd try keeping watch or something." He sat down on the veranda and looked out into the courtyard where the demon had appeared. By

his side was a tray, a small teapot, and a teacup. It appeared he planned to stay the night on the lookout.

“...Why?” she asked.

“Well, you said I could, didn’t you?”

It seemed like he’d listened to her selfish whim and sent away the ronin from earlier, then elected to guard her himself, for his own peace of mind. Zenji never got fed up with her, no matter how much grief she caused him. That was the kind of man he was.

“I did say that, but I didn’t think you’d really come.”

“It’s fine though, right? I mean, somebody who’s never fought a day in their life like me is about as useful as a scarecrow here, but even scarecrows are used to protect things, aren’t they?” he joked.

“Zenji...” She let out a soft sigh, one full of relief. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to be forthright with her gratitude, so she said, “Hmph! Whatever. I bet you don’t even believe my story.”

“Ah, well...”

Her heart ached as she heard the hesitation in his voice. He was worried for her, but not because he believed her. He was merely standing watch to try to comfort an uneasy child, and that made her feel pathetic. She bit her lip, partly out of shame and partly out of fear. Weakly, she said, “I know Father doesn’t believe me either. That’s why he hired some ronin.”

“That’s not true,” Zenji said without hesitation. “There’s no doubt in my mind that your father is always thinking about what’s best for you.”

His words were full of certainty and did not sound like cheap nothings simply meant to soothe her. Even so, however, Natsu could not bring herself to believe him.

“But I’m not—” *his real daughter.*

She forced down the words, afraid to hear them out loud.

Many would agree that she was well loved by Jyuuzou. But the lack of blood ties between them still weighed on her. She lost her parents before she could

remember and never once lamented their passing. For all it mattered, Jyuuzou was her real father. But she began to doubt things when she heard the servants of the house gossiping about a son of Jyuuzou's who had run away from home. That got her thinking, could she perhaps be a replacement for her father's real child? What if he didn't love her like she loved him? Once the seed of doubt was planted, it could only grow. Perhaps, if she too—

“RETURN... ME...”

Her heavy thoughts were drowned out by a sickening voice. So, it had come back tonight.

“A-aah...”

“Miss Natsu? Is something wrong?”

“I-It's here... It's here!”

“Huh? What's—” Zenji froze at the feeling of a cold, resentful glare that made his hair stand on end.

“RETURN... ME... DAUGHTER!”

“Oh...you've got to be kidding.” He stood in shock, understandably so, given that he hadn't believed a single word of Natsu's story.

“Z-Zenji!”

“Don't open the door!”

His warning came a second too late. Natsu had already slid open the door and now saw with her own eyes the ominous shadow stirring.

“RETURN... ME... DAUGHTER.”

It happened faster than the mind could comprehend. A black splotch writhed in the darkness ahead, from which a demon emerged. Its skin festered, as though it had been bathed in acid, rendering even its gender indeterminate. It reached out an arm, as though in want of something, and hobbled closer.

“What the heck...? No. This is not happening,” Zenji said in disbelief. He'd realized that the demon's arm was reaching towards Natsu.

A shiver ran down her spine. She tried to run, but her legs wouldn't move.

“Ah...” She couldn’t even scream; she let out a thin, raspy croak.

But then a familiar figure moved between her and the demon. Zenji blocked the way. “H-ha ha. D-don’t worry, Miss.”

Even now, he was trying to help her. But what could an ordinary person do against such a monster? His legs were trembling in terror.

The demon didn’t stop. It paid no mind to Zenji and slowly, but surely, closed the distance.

“RETURN... ME...” It let out a horrific, longing screech.

Natsu’s mind froze, stuck imagining the horror that was surely soon to come. Zenji would not abandon her, she was certain, which meant only one fate awaited him. The thought horrified her as much as it would if her life were on the line instead.

“...DAUGHTER.”

A nausea-inducing, acidic smell assaulted their noses. But they still didn’t look away. The demon reached a hand towards Zenji’s neck. Struck with fear and resignation, he simply watched in a daze as his death neared.

Then, just as death looked certain, the demon’s arm vanished.

“Huh...?”

Zenji’s confusion was matched by Natsu’s own. The horrific end they’d expected did not come, and instead the demon’s arm was rolling on the ground.

A man appeared. Natsu’s mind was still processing the events, but she recognized the man. He was about six shaku tall, had an iron scabbard at his waist and a sword in his hand—it was the ronin from before.

“Demon, before I slay you, tell me your name,” he said calmly.

The demon didn’t reply, simply saying, **‘RETURN... ME, RETURN... ME,’** over and over.

“Yeah, I didn’t expect much anyway.”

Despite standing before the grotesque fiend, the man was calm. He was so offhand about the situation that suddenly, everything seemed to go back to

normal again. Natsu's fear began to greatly subside.

"Y-you're that ronin from earlier..." Natsu said.

"Just here to advertise my services."

Leisurely, the man took a stance with his sword. The demon, perhaps recognizing him and his sharp blade as a threat and not prey, suddenly came to life and leapt at him.

"Look out!" Zenji yelled, but it was already over.

A single vertical strike was all it took, timed just as the demon began to move. In the blink of an eye, the demon was bisected, and fell to the ground.

"Wh-whoa..." Zenji murmured with awe. The man had slain a demon in a single strike, just like the sword masters he'd read about in those cheap books depicting tall tales.

The ronin, Jinya—his expression placid throughout—turned his back on the dead demon and softly asked, "Now then, how much would you like to pay me for my services?"

2

A COURTYARD AT NIGHT. A dead demon. A man wielding a sword. Altogether, this moment under the stars looked like a scene from another world.

"Now then, how much would you like to pay me for my services?" the man nonchalantly asked. It took Natsu a moment to realize he was teasing her for what she said earlier that day about "not having any money to give the likes of him."

"...I don't like this guy," she said, now calm. She was more bitter about having been one-upped than anything.

Zenji admonished her, calmer now himself. "That's no attitude to take, Miss Natsu. This man just saved us... Actually, in fact, what're you doing here anyway, Jinya?"

"The one who hired me was Jyuuzou-dono; I'd be remiss to abandon the job

just because you told me not to come.”

“So you only pretended to leave, and hid in the courtyard?”

“That is correct.”

The idea of Jinya pretending to leave, hiding, and then lying in wait for the demon to arrive seemed a bit silly to Zenji, but he kept quiet since that had saved their skins. He let out a deep sigh, one full of relief. “Right. Well, whatever. Thanks. Honestly, I never would’ve thought that monster might actually appear.”

“...I knew it. You didn’t believe me at all,” Natsu said with a reproachful glare.

Zenji’s relief had loosened his tongue a bit too much. “O-oh, well, I, uh...” He hemmed and hawed as he tried to think up an excuse, but he came up with nothing under the stare of her misty eyes.

“Hmph. I don’t care. It’s all over now, anyway.” She roughly brushed the tears from her eyes, but the disappointment remained. He didn’t believe her. That sad truth cast a dark shadow over her heart.

“Miss Natsu, I’m—”

“No, this isn’t over yet.”

That brusque statement interrupted Zenji before he could apologize. While the two had started to relax, Jinya had remained sharp, glaring at the demon he just cut down.

“What’re you talking about? Didn’t you just kill it?” Natsu said.

The demon lay unmoving, dead. But Jinya’s expression remained rigid and his sword unsheathed.

At his prompting, the two looked at the demon and saw something strange. Little by little, the ground began to show, starting from the extremities of the demon’s body. The corpse was turning transparent.

“What the heck?” Zenji murmured.

The corpse slowly lost its color, as though melting into the night. As the two watched, dazed, the corpse faded completely. Less than half a minute had

passed.

“Is it...dead?” Natsu asked.

Jinya grimly shook his head. “Demons dissolve into white vapor when they die. At least, that’s been my experience every time.”

The demon just now hadn’t met that fate. Which meant...

“It’s still alive?” Zenji asked.

“I don’t know how, but it would seem so. Which means it’ll come again, for as long as it’s after the girl.”

The relaxed atmosphere grew tense once again.

Jinya swung the blood off his sword and slowly sheathed it. The smoothness of the action seemed to dull time itself as one watched. In contrast, his voice was as sharp as steel. “I’m sorry, Natsu-dono, but I’ll be guarding you for the time being, whether you like it or not.”

Dawn broke. Jinya sat out on the veranda. He’d kept watch through the night, but the demon hadn’t returned. So far, the demon had only appeared at night, so things would likely be safe now that it was dawn. Still, the demon wasn’t dead. They weren’t out of the woods yet.

He heard the door slide open behind him. Natsu must’ve awoken. He turned around, and the somewhat-sulky girl walked past him without a word.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To wash my face. Don’t follow me,” she snapped back.

It was morning, so he figured things should be safe enough. “All right,” he grunted and looked back out onto the courtyard. It was well kept and had a nostalgic tastefulness to it that was hard to put into words. He was enjoying the soothing sight, when Natsu returned and sat beside him.

“Did you sleep?” he asked.

“A little.” Her hair was uncombed, and she was still in her sleepwear. An overcast look hung on her face.

Of course, just because she sat down beside him didn't necessarily mean she wanted to talk. The two shared an awkward silence, which stretched on between them.

"Here you are. Sorry for the wait, Miss." It was neither Jinya nor Natsu who broke the silence but a very young apprentice of Sugaya carrying a tray.

"Those are for him," Natsu said. "That'll be all."

The apprentice set the tray between the two and left. On it were two rice balls, some pickled vegetables, a small teapot, and a teacup. The rice and the tea were still warm, presumably freshly made.

"Um..." Jinya was puzzled.

"Breakfast," she said curtly.

He frowned, confused. Frustrated, she added, "For you. You're hungry, aren't you?"

Jinya realized that she'd gone to wash her face as an excuse to get him breakfast. This was her indirect way of thanking him for keeping guard. What a troublesome girl. Still, he was grateful. He thanked her and bowed his head, prompting a surprised look from her. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"...I didn't expect a ronin to offer his thanks so easily. Weird."

Jinya didn't take any offense. Ronin were thought to be rough sorts, and there was nothing he could do about that.

He dug into his meal. Natsu didn't seem to be going anywhere—she remained as he ate. The two looked out on the courtyard in silence.

"You think it'll come again tonight?"

"It's likely."

"I see," she said with disinterest. But she couldn't quite hide her trembling.

Jinya thought of the festering demon. Its appearance was harrowing, but what Natsu really feared was likely not that but its chilling growl, "**RETURN... ME... DAUGHTER.**" Those words had to have hurt her somewhere deep.

"Hey... Do you think that demon might be..." she trailed off.

He understood without needing her to finish. She lost her parents at an early age and didn't even know what they looked like. There was no denying that particular possibility.

"Relax," he said. "I'm stronger than I look."

She frowned, understanding he was purposefully avoiding the answer by changing the topic. She went with it however, saying, "Fine, I'll admit you're strong. I thought all ronin were just cowards who talked big and ran at the first sign of trouble, but it seems my father has a good eye."

It was a compliment, just a condescending one. It seemed Zenji wasn't off the mark when he called her a little bratty. Yet, Jinya took no offense—partially because she was still of a tender age, but mainly because he understood this was just how she was.

"...Why aren't you mad?" she asked.

"About what?"

"About everything I've said. I didn't hold back yesterday either, but you don't seem to care at all."

"Huh. So you were aware that you were acting up."

"Oh, shut up. Just answer my question." At his verbal prod, she immediately defaulted to hurling abuse. Her query seemed to come mainly from annoyance.

He took a sip of his tea, then answered calmly. "It's half an act. Showing emotion in a battle can give your opponent an opening, that's why I try to remain mindful and calm."

"So hiding your emotions is some kind of sword-fighting technique?"

"Yeah, that's about right."

It wasn't like he was keeping himself battle-ready at every waking moment. He was just trying to rein in his quick-tempered nature for the sake of the moments when it really mattered.

Few devoted themselves so thoroughly to the sword in these peaceful times. The idea struck Natsu as strange. She regarded him with a mixture of awe and doubt. "...Wait," she said. "Doesn't that mean you've actually been angry, just

on the inside?”

“More or less,” he answered lightly, as though only making small talk.

She grimaced, conflicted. If she had really angered him, then maybe she should apologize. No, she reconsidered, maybe that would be weird.

She vacillated on it, her expression shifting as she did. Jinya much preferred this side of her than the strained one he’d seen since during the night.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It’s only right for a stranger like me to be regarded with suspicion.”

“Perhaps, but still...” Unable to find the right words, she puffed out her cheeks. The childish gesture made him smile, genuinely. She glared at him, not taking kindly to being made light of. “What’s so funny?”

Still, a thirteen-year-old girl was only so threatening. Her glare only served to lighten the mood even more. “Nothing, I was just thinking you have a hard time expressing yourself.”

“...Hmph.” She turned away with a huff, still unable to apologize. He wouldn’t dare call her childish for that, however. He knew well enough what it felt like to have something that needed saying but be held back by other feelings.

“You’re not alone in that regard,” he said. “There are some things you just can’t bring yourself to do, no matter how much you brood over it.”

“...For you too?”

“Absolutely. Even at my age, there’s still so much I can’t make my mind up about.”

“You’re not *that* much older than me, though.”

He tensed. His heart ached a little. “...Perhaps.”

She craned her neck to the side. “Did I say something weird?”

Jinya’s appearance hadn’t changed at all since he departed Kadono ten years ago. He’d stopped aging at eighteen, just like how his sister stayed a child. Their casual conversation made him painfully aware of his demonic nature. But perhaps the ache in his heart was proof that at least some part of him remained

human.

While Jinya struggled to form a reply, a stern-faced man approached from the side: the proprietor of Sugaya, Jyuuzou. “Ah, I see you two have gotten to know each other.”

“Father!”

Natsu bolted to her feet and ran over to him. A lucky break. Now Jinya’s pained look could go unnoticed.

“Good morning! Why are you out of the shop so early?” she asked.

“I just wanted to see how you were doing. Were you able to sleep last night?”

“I was, all because you assigned me a guard. Thank you.” She beamed. Around her father, her brattiness was nowhere to be seen. It was clear she adored him, and it was evident from the look on his face that he adored her as well. The two were a heart-warming sight, a lovely father-daughter pair.

“I see.” Jyuuzou was happy to hear that his daughter was well but quickly reverted to his stern look. His expression felt softer than before, though. With a single, heavy nod, he looked at Jinya. “Well done.”

“My job’s still not done.”

“I see. Then do see it through.”

“As you wish.”

Their exchange was terribly dry. Jinya kept his responses short and blunt, not even meeting Jyuuzou’s eyes as he sipped tea. That was no way to treat a client, but Jyuuzou said nothing of it. In fact, he avoided looking at Jinya as well.

Natsu admonished Jinya in her father’s stead. “Hey! That’s no attitude to take towards the one paying you!”

“It’s fine, Natsu.”

“Father...?”

“I trust this man enough to overlook some rudeness.” Her father, typically a stickler for manners, paid no mind to the ronin’s rudeness and went back into the store. Natsu watched him go, dumbfounded.

Before he could fully leave, however, Jinya called out to him. “Jyuuzou-dono.”

Jyuuzou stopped, but he didn’t turn around. Jinya was fine with that. What he had to say wasn’t important enough to warrant that. He just figured he’d say it while he was there.

“I’ll be repaying my debt to you.”

Having said that, Jinya looked back out on the courtyard and sipped his tea. Natsu, of course, hadn’t a clue what he meant. But Jyuuzou understood immediately and cast his gaze downwards.

“...I see. You do that,” he said.

He sounded almost content. Similarly, the corners of Jinya’s mouth rose in a slight smile. The two said nothing further, and Jyuuzou left.

“What in the world was that just now?” Natsu asked, pressing Jinya for answers.

Jinya didn’t feel like answering. He took a last sip of his tea, then put the teacup down on the tray with an intentional *thunk*. “Thanks for the breakfast.” He stood and began to walk away as well.

There was no need for him to stand guard, now that it was daytime. She understood this but was disgruntled by his lack of an answer. “Hey! Where do you think you’re going?”

“To sleep. I’ll be back at night.” He waved in lieu of a goodbye and headed out of the courtyard, but not without one last backward glance. Thanks to the tea, he was able to swallow down the emotions threatening to work their way to the surface.

He heard one last complaint from behind him—“What’s with that guy?!”—then left without looking back.

On his way out, Jinya stopped by the shop and saw Zenji giving orders to an apprentice. Things looked busy as they prepared for the store’s opening, but there was something Jinya wanted to ask. When Zenji had his hands free for a moment, he went to talk to him and was greeted with a warm smile.

“Oh, Jinya. Heading back now?”

“Yeah. There’s something I wanted to talk with you about first, though.”

“Right now? Uh, okay...” He turned to what Jinya presumed to be the manager, a man in his thirties who was in the back, taking stock in a ledger.

“Hey, I gotta step out for a second! Sorry!”

“It’s about Miss Natsu’s thing, right? Be back by noon.”

“Got it! All right, let’s go.”

It seemed the manager had been filled in on the details, at least somewhat. He wore a wry grin, as though to say, *You’ve been dragged in on that spoiled girl’s trouble, eh? Good luck.*

Zenji hurried out of the store in a half trot.

“Sorry to bother you when you’re so busy,” Jinya said.

“Not at all, we’re the ones getting your help, after all. Besides...I’ve been wanting to talk about last night too.” There had to be a lot on his mind after seeing a real demon with his own eyes. He smiled and spoke lightheartedly, but there was a faint gloom about him. “Wanna get something to eat?”

“I’m all right.”

“Let’s do tea then. I could go for a plate of dango.”

The two went to a nearby teahouse and put in a quick order. There were few customers this early in the morning, so they were able to talk comfortably.

“Thanks for what you did yesterday, by the way. I know I already thanked you, but it feels inadequate thanking you just once.” Zenji put his hands on his knees and bowed his head deeply. It was a grand gesture, especially considering Jinya was no more than a penniless ronin. Not that Zenji was the type to fret about status in the first place.

Jinya accepted the thanks but did not smile. Nothing was over yet. “You’re welcome, but my job isn’t finished.”

“Ah, right... We’ll be needing you tonight as well, won’t we?”

“Without a doubt,” Jinya said firmly.

To his surprise, Zenji's expression seemed to cloud over. "You believed her though, huh," he said weakly. He sounded almost apologetic. The server brought their tea over, but he didn't seem to notice, gaze wandering as he smiled wanly. "You actually waited for a demon to appear."

"I suppose."

"I didn't believe her one bit. I just assumed she was trying to get her father's attention."

So he really was sorry, then. Jinya heard the regret in his voice and decided he'd do the polite thing and listen quietly.

"But in the end, she was telling the truth. I should've believed her. Why didn't I believe her...?"

If he'd really cared for Natsu, then he should've trusted her, more than some strange ronin did, anyway. But he didn't, and that had hurt her. Regret lined his face as he grimaced. He said, "Sorry. Forget I said anything."

Jinya stayed silent, sipping his tea as though he'd heard nothing.

Zenji said, "Sorry," one more time before trying to change the mood. "Oh, right. You said you wanted to talk about something?"

It was obvious he was forcing himself to act cheerful, but it'd be boorish to point that out. Jinya pretended not to notice the stiffness in Zenji's smile and cut to the chase. "I did. It's about what the demon's been saying, '*Return... me... daughter*'."

On their first meeting, Zenji had mentioned Natsu's parents died when she was little, after which Jyuuzou took her in. She didn't know who her parents were, so there was a chance she might think the demon was one of them, however unlikely that might be. Jinya's question wasn't solely out of worry for Natsu, however. He had a feeling he needed to know more about her parents to resolve this incident.

"Ah..." Zenji grasped what Jinya was getting at right away. Unexpectedly, however, he replied rather nonchalantly. "Miss Natsu's real parents are long dead. I get what you're thinking...but it's probably not that. I doubt my boss would have taken her in otherwise."

“What do you mean?”

Zenji hesitated, perhaps out of deference to the owner of Sugaya and his daughter. But eventually, he muttered something about this being for Natsu’s sake and said, “Jyuuzou-sama’s wife was killed by a demon.”

Unknowingly, Jinya clenched his right hand. Hearing about Jyuuzou’s past and the reason he hated demons made him uncomfortable.

“I heard it from our manager. It’s why Jyuuzou-sama doesn’t like hearing about demons and is even more on edge than Miss Natsu is right now.”

“So, you’re saying he’d never have adopted Natsu-dono if there were even the slightest chance she was the daughter of a demon?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Zenji confirmed. “Miss Natsu’s parents were relatives of Jyuuzou-sama too, so he definitely knew them well. I can’t say for certain that your guess is wrong, but it’s very unlikely.”

Jinya pondered, pensive. He had a theory on the demon’s true identity, but it only made him squint in distaste.

“You think I’m wrong?” Zenji asked.

“No, not at all. One last question, does Jyuuzou-dono really hate demons that much?”

“Yeah, I’d say he does. Oh, right... I’ve heard this from Jyuuzou-sama himself, but apparently, he had a son who ran off long ago because of some demon.” Zenji scratched his cheek awkwardly. “To tell the truth, I don’t know much more than that. It’s a bit hard to ask about it with Miss Natsu around.”

That tidbit told Jinya that Zenji really cared about the girl. “Honestly,” he continued, “I’m fine being in the dark about all that. But it’s clear he lost his wife and son because of demons, so it makes sense he sees them as the reason he lost his family.”

“...I see. He’s had his fair share of demon problems too, then.”

“Yeah. It’s probably why he’s so gruff all the time. So go easy on him for me, will ya?” Zenji said apologetically.

Jinya nodded back, and the conversation tapered off. An awkward silence

formed between them. Unable to bear it any longer, Zenji picked a topic at random and asked, “So, uh, what’s your father up to then?”

“He lost his life a long time ago,” Jinya replied stiffly. Even after all these years, he couldn’t talk about it without hurting. Something about that made him feel pathetic.

Zenji’s face clouded over. “Ah... A demon?”

“Yeah. He was the one who taught me the sword. Best swordsman in the whole village, but...yeah.”

Jinya got lost in memories of his old home. There was Motoharu, who’d taken him and his sister in. His wife Yokaze, who’d accepted outsiders like them. He owed a lot to those two. But in the end, they died before he could repay their kindness.

“Sorry I dredged that up,” Zenji said.

“Not at all, I’m the one who wanted to talk to you.”

Their awkward mood continued. The two made some small talk a little longer, then parted.

Dawn had brought no changes to their situation, and now night neared again.

3

THE WICKED SPIRITS OF NATURE.

The Ghost beneath the Willow.

The Dish Mansion.

Demons.

The Cow Head.

Many such scary stories exist, but mine is scarier than them all.

My parents died before I could remember, after which the man I call my father adopted me. He’s a man who is strict when it comes to work and often has a scary face on, but he’s kind to me. He doesn’t talk much, but he shows me

lots of love. We aren't blood related, but it doesn't matter. I consider him my real father.

But one day, I overheard something.

"Jyuuzou-sama's really had it rough, huh? What with his wife being killed by a demon and his son getting abducted by yet another."

"Yeah. Wonder what he's going to do about an heir."

"Maybe he believes his son will come back. I mean, why would he adopt a girl instead of a boy if he didn't?"

My father had a wife and a real son. But he lost them both to demons. That was why he hated demons with all his heart.

"Hmph..."

Occasionally, I'd spot him drinking alone and gazing at a mortuary tablet. He always had a sad look on his face then. I could tell he missed his wife and, like the apprentice boys had said, was still waiting for his son to return. I considered him my real father, but he still considered his real family to be the one he lost to demons.

That was when some horrible thoughts crossed my mind: What if I were the only one who thought the two of us were family? What if I was just a replacement? Would I be tossed aside if his real son ever came home?

I wanted to ask him these questions, but at the same time I didn't want to know the truth. So I said nothing of it at all.

The Wicked Spirits of Nature.

The Ghost beneath the Willow.

The Dish Mansion.

Demons.

The Cow Head.

Many such scary stories exist, but mine is scarier than them all. The fictitious tales people tell one another do nothing to scare me. What I fear is the truth.

After the shop closed for the day, Jyuuzou returned home and had dinner with Natsu. The two ate in silence. Stern as he was, Jyuuzou did not much approve of talking during meals, but today he broke the silence.

“Natsu.”

“Ah, y-yes?” Taken by surprise, she stammered. Then she blushed from embarrassment.

“How is the man I assigned to guard you? Any problems?”

“No, he’s fine. He’s a ronin, but he doesn’t seem to be a bad person. But I’d be okay with anyone you picked for me.”

“Is that so?”

“Um, thank you. For worrying about me.”

“That’s not something I need be thanked for. What parent doesn’t worry for their child?”

Jyuuzou rarely smiled, but that was fine. Natsu could tell he cared for her, and that fact made her smile in his stead. Her father was special to her; he was her only family. Zenji was like a brother to her, yes, but the two things couldn’t compare.

Jyuuzou had a taste for alcohol and ate every dinner with a decanter of sake. Natsu had a question, so she waited for the moment he poured a cup and downed it in one gulp to ask. “Hey, Father? Why’d you hire that man, of all people?”

She wasn’t complaining, simply curious. The man he hired had proved himself capable, but there was no knowing that beforehand. Why had Jyuuzou hired a ronin?

Jyuuzou thought for a brief moment. He rotated the sake cup in his hand as he answered, “It was partly because of what a long-time customer of mine told me. There have been many rumors of demons in Edo lately, but there were also rumors of a man who could cut down demons in a single blow.”

“And that man was the ronin?”

“Yes. He claimed to be able to cut down any demon, for the right price...and it

seems he meant it.”

Natsu relaxed into a joyful smile. Her father hadn’t taken the strange step of assigning her a ronin because he didn’t believe her story, but because he *did* believe her.

“But I suppose the biggest reason why I chose him was because I knew I could trust him. I could never leave you in the hands of someone I couldn’t trust.” With a soft smile, he poured another drink, having his liquor in a good mood for once. After drinking the last drop, he let out a content sigh and gazed lovingly at the now-empty cup. Natsu did not know what his mind saw reflected in there.

“Take care of her,” Jyuuzou said to Jinya, who had come back for the night, before returning to his room.

On the veranda outside Natsu’s room sat Jinya and Zenji, staring into the courtyard like they had the night before. Natsu looked at them skeptically. The ronin she could understand; he was hired to guard her. But why was the other man, who hadn’t fought a day in his life, here now?

“...What’re you doing here, Zenji?” she asked.

“Oh, you know, I thought I’d try and make up for last night, ha ha.”

She stuck her head out of her room and narrowed her eyes reproachfully, causing him to stiffen. She was clearly still angry that he hadn’t believed her story about the demon. Even so, she said, “Fine. I don’t care. Do what you want.”

He understood her meanness was mostly deserved, and didn’t reproach her for it. Weakly, he replied, “Aww... Please forgive me already, Miss Natsu...”

“Hmm... All right. We can call it even if you take me shopping or something.”

“That’s all? Gladly!” He beamed, in a complete about-face.

The two of them were relieved to bury the hatchet. His words had hurt her, but she hadn’t actually been all that angry, just a bit pouty. She had intended to forgive him sooner or later anyway—and though she’d never say it, she was glad it was sooner and not later.

That settled, she turned to Jinya and said, “Hey, you’ve known my father for a while now?”

“I suppose so,” Jinya replied.

“Uh-huh... That explains why he likes you so much.”

Zenji nodded and said, “Oh, yeah, he does seem rather taken with you.”

“Right?” Natsu said. “It was weird enough that he hired a ronin, but it was even weirder how he didn’t get angry despite how rude you were this morning. Just how do you two know each other?”

“What are you, a wife grilling her unfaithful husband?” Zenji joked.

“Shut up, Zenji,” she snapped. Then, back to Jinya, she said, “So?”

Jinya showed no sign he minded the aggressive questioning. He kept his eyes on the courtyard. Still vigilant, he answered, “I don’t know why he trusts me so much, I simply took this job to repay what I owe to him.”

“Huh...? Well, whatever. Sure. I’ll believe you, since my father seems to trust you. Plus, you weren’t lying about being strong, either.” Jyuuzou was everything to Natsu, so if he trusted this ronin of unknown origin, then she could too.

Jinya was a little surprised at this. “You’ll trust me just because Jyuuzou-dono does? You must be really fond of him.”

“Of course I am. We may not be related by blood, but he raised me. I owe him a lot.” Jyuuzou wasn’t the expressive type, but he was Natsu’s only family and a strict but loving father she could be proud of.

“I see. That’s good,” he said softly. It was a bit strange to hear such a gentle tone from a man who’d cut down a demon like it was nothing. “I can see it goes both ways, though. Jyuuzou-dono really cares for you as well.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Zenji chimed in. “He assigned you a guard just a day after you told him about the demon. If anything, I’d say he’s a little overprotective.”

Natsu cocked her head at this, but she couldn’t fully hide her happiness. Despite the looming threat of a demon manifestation, she felt hardly any fear in

her joy.

“...Oh. You were right, Zenji-dono,” Jinya mused to himself.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

In her good mood, Natsu missed Jinya’s muttering. She was about to ask him another question, but he beat her to the punch. “Oh, right. I heard Jyuuzou-dono has a son, but—”

“Don’t know, don’t care.” She cut him off. Her good mood was gone now, replaced with a rising sense of unease. “Who cares about him? Don’t ask me such stupid things.”

“I...see. Sorry.”

He spoke a little curtly, but he didn’t seem angry. In fact, her reaction seemed to clarify something for him, prompting a small nod of understanding. Something about his calmness rubbed her the wrong way, but she didn’t follow up on it.

A couple of hours passed. Conversation slowly wound down as the night deepened. As fatigue grew in Natsu, so too did worry return, her gloom deepening with the night.

“Are you not going to sleep?” Jinya asked.

“I *can’t* sleep,” she replied, a bit grouchily. She stayed out on the veranda with the two men, trying to kill time.

Jinya watched the courtyard like a statue, while Zenji reassured her that he was still holding up fine himself. Despite their differences in style, they were both doing what they could for her sake. As she was the demon’s target, it’d probably be less trouble for them if she stayed in her room and holed up in the bed. Unfortunately, she was too restless for that.

“Hey... Can children be born to demons and humans?” she asked. If her father was to be believed, Jinya has fought many demons before. He’d likely know the answer to her question.

“It’s possible,” Jinya answered. “Whether the child takes after the human or

the demon differs on a case-by-case basis, though.”

“Oh...” Her slight hope was dashed. Maybe she really was the demon’s daughter then, just as it said.

“Don’t worry, Miss Natsu. It’s not what you think. Definitely,” Zenji reassured her.

“But I’m not blood related to Father, and I don’t know anything about my real parents!” she yelled. Zenji’s words did nothing to soothe her. “How do I know for sure I’m not...you know...”

“You’re not,” Jinya said without emotion. His voice was cold and stiff like lead. “You’re not a child of that demon. I guarantee it.”

Hearing such a cold voice only made her more emotional. “What do you know?!” she yelled.

“I know that demon.”

This time, his icy voice served to cool her heated head. “Huh...?”

“I have close ties to them. That’s why I can say with certainty you are not its child.”

“...Really?”

“I do not tell lies. So don’t worry yourself for no reason.” He spoke firmly, without taking his eyes off the courtyard. His blunt words lacked gentleness, but that only made them feel more truthful.

“H-he’s right, Miss Natsu!” Zenji said. “I mean, if a demon expert says so, who are we to argue? There’s nothing to worry about! The two of us will drive off that demon, easy-peasy!”

“You mean you’ll watch as he does all the work...” Natsu said.

“Y-yes, well... Jeez, you’re sure not holding back today, ha ha.” Zenji slumped his shoulders with a little exaggeration. On closer inspection, though, it was clear he was grinning broadly. His joking around was his way of comforting Natsu. Her unease finally faded as she understood.

She heaved a great yawn. “All this talking has tired me out.” She glanced

sidelong at Jinya. He still hadn't taken his eyes off the courtyard. All the better for her; it'd be harder to do this with him looking at her. With some hesitation, she worked up the courage to ask, "H-hey, what's your name?"

"...Jinya."

"Jinya, huh. All right, I'll call you that from now on." She turned away sharply, trying to hide her embarrassment. Calling him by his name was as much overt gratitude as she was willing to show through her shyness.

Zenji covered his mouth with a hand, trying his best to suppress a laugh. Natsu's awkwardness amused him. After shaking with laughter for a bit, he calmed down and leaned over to whisper in Jinya's ear. "Thanks, Jinya. You lied to make Miss Natsu feel better, right?"

"Huh? Um, no?"

"It's fine, I get it. Ha ha, you and her can both be so bashful."

Jinya furrowed his brow, confused as to what he was being thanked for. Zenji seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Hey... What are you two whispering about?" Natsu said with a sharp glare.

"Nothing, nothing," Zenji said with a smile.

The mood was light. Things finally seemed back to normal. Then Jinya stood and broke the pleasant mood with a most unsettling question.

"...Do you two know how demons are born?"

"Huh? What brought that on?" Zenji asked.

Jinya said nothing. Natsu looked at him, perplexed by the sudden out-of-place question. Zenji continued, "Well...I'd figure they're born from two demons or something. Am I wrong?"

"Not entirely. There are actually many ways a demon can be born. Occasionally two demons will pair up and birth a demon, like you said. Sometimes a demon will defile a human for pleasure. Very rarely, a demon will fall in love with a human. And every now and then, a demon is born from nothing."

“From *nothing*?”

“Yes. Emotions carry power, more so the darker they turn. Anger. Hatred. Jealousy. Attachment. Grief. Hunger. Strong, dark feelings accrue and solidify, eventually taking shape.”

Perhaps he asked such a question because he knew what was about to come. Natsu’s eyes widened, and a wind began to blow in the courtyard. The space before them contorted, and a black fog oozed forth before gradually gathering, accruing, solidifying, slowly taking shape—just like Jinya had described.

A demon was being born before them.

“Demons born from nothing are nothing more than emotion given form.” Jinya leapt into the courtyard, not looking back at Natsu cowering behind him. But he didn’t attack. He didn’t even draw his blade. Was he waiting for the demon to form?

The black haze began to solidify, a grotesque body appearing. Its festering skin let off a repugnant smell.

“Name yourself,” Jinya said. He received the same answer as he had the night before.

“RETURN... ME... DAUGHTER,” the demon groaned. Perhaps its intellect was too low to say anything else. Unlike the night before however, it didn’t hesitate, immediately recognizing the sword-carrying ronin as a threat and charging at him recklessly.

To Natsu’s eyes, the demon appeared to be a blur, but it moved too slowly for Jinya. He took half a step back and to the side. The instant it drew near enough, he rammed into its chest, sending the demon flying to the ground.

“You don’t even have enough intelligence to give your own name... A shame.”

Far from cowering before the monster, Jinya faced it and handled it with ease. Natsu was awed by his abnormal strength. Still, the demon was a being beyond human comprehension. The blow it received wasn’t enough to stop it. It crawled onto all fours and growled before charging in again.

Without unsheathing, Jinya took his scabbard and struck the butt of his sword

against the demon's chin. He then bludgeoned it with a powerful swing, and the demon collapsed onto the ground. However, the scabbard blow was hardly lethal, and the demon rose yet again. Seeing this, Jinya sighed lightly.

"Wh-what are you doing?! Just finish it already!" Zenji yelled. He couldn't hold back his complaints.

Natsu felt the same way. It was clear, even to their untrained eyes, that Jinya could end this any moment he so chose. Yet he didn't. He hadn't even drawn his sword.

"Do you want me to kill it?" Jinya asked, as though it needed clarification.

The demon rose again as they talked, but Jinya didn't attack, even as the demon stood poised and ready. Impatient and exasperated, Zenji yelled, "Yes! I'm begging you, please, just—"

Jinya interrupted, his voice now cold as lead. "I'm asking Natsu-dono."

"Huh...?" Natsu blanked. Why was her name suddenly brought up, she wondered—and yet subconsciously she understood why and trembled. "M-me?"

Jinya held his gaze on her, as though seeing through to her core—no, as though cutting her facade to pieces. "Is this not what you wanted? To be attacked by a demon so your father would worry for you like *real family*?" he said the truth so matter-of-factly. "I'll ask you again, do you really want me to kill this demon?"

She was terrified, paralyzed by fear, unable to utter a word. But it wasn't the demon that scared her, nor the possibility that she might be a demon's child. She was scared of her fragility that this rugged-looking ronin was laying bare.

There are many scary stories in this world, and Natsu had her own.

Her parents died before she could remember, after which Jyuuzou adopted her. She never once lamented their passing. For all she cared, Jyuuzou was her true father.

But one day, she overheard—her father once had a wife and son, but a demon killed his wife, and another took his son. That was why he hated demons

so much—he loved his lost family to this day. He longed for his son’s return, as the apprentice boys said. To Natsu, he may have been true family, but to him, his true family had been taken from him by demons.

She began to think: What if she were just a replacement for his real child? What if he didn’t love her like she did?

Once the seed of doubt was planted, it could only grow.

Perhaps—she thought—if I, too, were attacked by a demon, then maybe he would love me.

“Zenji-dono was right,” Jinya said. “This demon is nothing more than a lie Natsu-dono made up. She just didn’t realize it.”

The demon stood up again and again to attack Jinya, only to be dodged and struck down each time. It didn’t relent, however, continuing to target Jinya and not Natsu herself. Probably because she didn’t want to hear anymore. The demon lunged at him, as though begging him not to expose any more of her frailty, while knowing all the while that it was a meaningless effort.

He said, “Even if I were to kill this demon now, it would only reappear tomorrow night.”

“How...?” *How can you be so sure*, she wanted to say. But, in truth, she knew why without having to think. She knew better than anyone.

“Because this demon is your own feelings given shape,” he stated plainly, mercilessly. “It’ll come each night for as long as you wish it, earning you your beloved father’s and Zenji’s attention each time. And when someone comes and says things you don’t want to hear, it’ll even attack them for you. How convenient. Is this not what you wanted?”

“Stop...”

“If I kill it now, it’ll just come back, over and over until you’re satisfied. The only way we can stop it is to end things from the source.”

“What? Are you telling me I should just die then?”

“No. I just need you to tell me yourself—*end it*.” Jinya’s eyes, sharp as a blade, narrowed ever so slightly on Natsu.

She understood what he meant to say. If the demon was created from her emotions, then she could choose to discard those emotions and *end it*. But to do so would be to abandon her desire to be loved by her father, and such a thing was impossible for her. “I...I can’t.”

She finally understood why the demon was so grotesque now. It was her. She kept her true, fragile self hidden away, yet still dared to demand love. She allowed her father to dote on her but didn’t believe his love genuine. She envied a wife and son long gone and was too ashamed to admit it. She hid all this festering ugliness—the real Natsu—deep inside, under the act of an arrogant, spoiled girl.

“No... No...!”

She was scared. Scared of facing the ugliness she’d kept hidden for so long. So she cried like a child. The demon continued to attack Jinya, only to be knocked down each time. With each blow, each kick, each tumble, she was reminded again of her ugly desire to be loved.

Really, all she wanted was to be close to her father. But that desire grew twisted and now took such a misshapen form. She had birthed something that did not belong in this world. Did that not, by extension, mean she didn’t belong in this world as well? If so, then perhaps the one who ought to be killed here was—

“You misunderstand, Miss Natsu.” A voice comforted her like a warm embrace.

“Zenji...?” she said through tears.

“The only thing that needs to end here is that demon, not you.”

You don’t understand, she thought as she wept. *That demon is who I really am—an ugly, ugly monster. Someone like me doesn’t deserve forgiveness.*

Zenji gently held her hand.

“No, you don’t understand—you *don’t understand!*” she yelled.

“It’s okay, Miss Natsu. Y’know, people say I’m really friendly, but even I have people I can’t get along with. There are times I don’t feel like getting up in the

morning for work, and I'm honestly fed up with how your father is always demanding the impossible from me—but keep that one a secret, okay?" He made a goofy grin.

Natsu was surprised to hear such things from him. She had thought of him as amicable in every regard. That was why he was so successful at working with the wholesale dealers and customers, and why he always let her scathing remarks slide. To her, Zenji was a hard-working, ever-patient, never-complaining, older brother figure—albeit one prone to making stupid remarks. She never knew this side of him, nor even thought to try and know.

"You're not alone," he continued. "Everyone's got a side to them that they hide. But even if there are some people I can't get along with, there are so many more I can; and work's super fun when things line up. Your father can be real irritating sometimes, but he gave me a place to work, and I'm thankful for that. Both sides of me are the real me. So what's the point of focusing on the negative side of yourself when there's so much more to you than that?"

There exists a hideous demon inside everyone, even me, he seemed to say. *So why should you alone worry about yours?*

He didn't belittle her youthful fears. He acknowledged them, hideous demon and all, and wanted her to do the same.

"That demon may be your emotions," he said, "but it's not all of you. Trust me, I know. You can be willful and hurtful sometimes, but you're also a kind girl who loves her father very much."

"Zenji..."

"There's no need to be ashamed of the feelings you have. Instead, talk them out with your father, and prove those feelings wrong. It'll be all right. I just know he thinks of you as family."

The grotesque demon was Natsu's emotions, given shape due to her inability to acknowledge them. But that wasn't all she was. To end things here would not mean discarding her emotions, but taking a chance to do things over and correct her mistakes. She could stop hiding her timidity under a guise of meanness. She could confront her jealousy. She could understand that all her ugliness was born out of love for her family, and even feel pride in that fact.

“You’re just like your father, Miss Natsu—always poor with words. But it’s time to open up.”

Perhaps that was all she ever really wanted.

“...End it,” she said. She would entrust her will to Jinya now.

The hideous demon was her own emotions. She could accept that now, and for that reason, she could now deny them. Denying her emotions wouldn’t make them disappear. She would always be afraid of learning truths, and the hideous demon would yet cling to her like a shadow, forever. But tonight, she would bring an end to her days of hiding from the truth. She would accept that the demon would never leave her side and face tomorrow a little more earnestly.

“End it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. That thing may be me, and all the feelings I locked away in fear of the truth, but that ends today. I’ll change who I am.” Although trembling, she bravely stared down the demon.

Jinya felt her determination and cracked a smile. Natsu found herself captivated by that smile, warm like familial love, but it only lasted a moment. His face quickly went neutral as he focused his sharp gaze on the demon again. “Right. Nothing that exists is changeless, except demons. That’s why your demon was born. These are your feelings that have become stagnant.”

But nothing can stay stagnant forever. Sometimes we freeze up in fear. Sometimes we cling to past regrets. Eventually, however, we must move forward again and live life.

Jinya finally drew his blade and took up a stance. With a single step forward, he turned to the side for a horizontal slash. “You’re in the way of those trying to live in the now. Begone.”

The wind roared once as it was cut, and then it was over. Beneath his blade, the demon lay in pieces.

The courtyard fell silent, and the mild autumnal breeze returned. Given time, the sound of insects would likely resume as well. The demon, splayed on the ground, no longer moved. A white vapor rose from it. This time, for certain, it was nearing its end.

“Is it over?”

“Yeah.”

Natsu was in Zenji’s arms, passed out from exhaustion. She slept peacefully, as though a looming shadow had been cast off her. In contrast, Zenji’s expression was grim. The reality that the earlier apparition had been born from such a small girl hung over him. He said, “Hey... That thing’s gone for good, right?”

“It should be, although it really depends on Natsu-dono from here on out.”

“Right...”

The demon was nothing more than a manifestation of Natsu’s emotions. Whether or not it returned was dependent on her. Still, Jinya didn’t seem too worried. Natsu had the ability to accept her shortcomings and had people that would support her. When she awoke, things would be different.

“I had no idea demons could be created so easily, though...” Zenji said.

“They aren’t, really. Natsu-dono’s emotions were just that strong.”

“Ah... I see. I didn’t mean to make light of her problems,” Zenji weakly said, realizing his mistake. Though not apparent on the surface, Natsu had worries deep enough to birth a demon.

Jinya had nothing to say, so the conversation came to an end. A cold night breeze blew.

“Whew, chilly,” Zenji remarked.

“It’s a cold night. You should put Natsu-dono to bed.”

“Good idea. What’re you going to do?”

“I’ll stand watch until dawn. Might as well.”

“Thanks. Goodnight then.” Zenji stood up, carrying Natsu. He walked to her

room and gently tucked her into bed. Then, understandably tired, he went to his own room to sleep.

Now only Jinya and the demon were left in the courtyard.

...Language is a strange thing. Jinya had claimed, “I do not tell lies,” but that didn’t mean he spoke the whole truth.

What follows now is something he didn’t wish to share with Natsu and Zenji.

“RETURN... ME... DAUGHTER...” After some time, the demon stood again. It hadn’t resurrected or anything of the sort. It simply forced its body to stand, even as it faded.

Jinya calmly readied his sword again. “I thought so.”

If this demon had truly been born from Natsu’s emotions alone, then it should have lost its reason for existence the moment she denied those emotions—and yet here it was, standing again.

It was as Jinya had suspected. Demons could be born from emotions, yes, but Natsu’s emotions alone were not enough to form a demon. The remainder had to come from somewhere. From the very start, Jinya had suspected another’s emotions had been mixed in.

There was one other woman who could help create the demon—Jyuuzou’s deceased wife. Her lingering emotions covered the shortfall of Natsu’s own and was the very reason the demon begged for its daughter’s return.

Which was just to say, the daughter the demon called for, was the daughter the wife had borne herself.

“It’s been a while. Although, if I’m being honest, I was too young to remember you. How strange it is that we’d be meeting again like this.” Jinya spoke politely to the demon in a low, somber tone. He gritted his teeth, apologetic, and he kept his sword tip pointed at the demon. “Would you be willing to tell me your name before you go?”

It was his way to ask for a name before cutting a demon down. He had regretted not asking before, once. Now he resolved himself to remember those

he killed and carry the weight of their death with him.

This time, however, was different. He simply wanted to know the name of this demon, *her* name. But he only received the same reply. ***“RETURN... ME... DAUGHTER...!”***

He grimaced, grinding his back teeth. He told himself this was simply the way things had to be, then raised his sword. Quietly, he said, “Forgive me for this dishonor. But everyone here is living their lives. We cannot afford to be trapped by the past.”

He split the demon down the middle. It collapsed for good this time, too far gone to release a death cry. Its corpse faded to white vapor, leaving nothing behind.

“Be at rest now,” he murmured woefully. His words alone remained in the courtyard as tribute, before even those faded into the night.

Jinya stood watch all night just in case, but nothing of note transpired. After the changes Natsu went through, the demon was unlikely to ever appear again.

Once dawn broke, he went to Jyuuzou to report what happened and collect his reward. He had no reason to stay, so tried to leave as quickly as he could—only to be ambushed by Zenji and Natsu in front of the shop.

“Thanks for all the help, Jinya,” Zenji said. “C’mon, you say it too, Miss Natsu.”

“Wh-whatever,” she said.

“The demon’s going to come back at this rate, y’know?”

“Ugh, I get it, I get it! Um...thanks,” she said a bit sulkily. Still, this was an improvement—much so from when Jinya had first met her. “It’ll take me a while, but I’m going to try changing little by little.”

“I see. That’s great,” Jinya replied.

She turned away, embarrassed. People didn’t change overnight; it would take some time yet for her to be the person she wanted to be.

“Got to say though, Jinya, you’re surprisingly dutiful. If you hadn’t stayed

behind after I told you to leave, we'd be done for," Zenji said. He found it surprising that a ronin, typically someone who only worked for money, was so patient and thoughtful. "Actually, why'd you go so far for us anyway?"

"Because Jyuuzou-dono asked me to," Jinya answered. "I couldn't abandon his request halfway through. I'm here not to make money but to pay back what I owe him."

"You said something like that before," Natsu said. "About repaying some debt to him. What was that all about?"

Jinya closed his eyes. He understood that words alone couldn't explain it, but tried anyway, for Natsu's sake. "One does not necessarily become more mature with age...but as the years pass, some things do become apparent."

Behind closed eyelids, he glimpsed the things his younger self couldn't protect. Bygone days of his father, his sister, and him. Before Kadono.

"As a child, I only saw the world I could see with my eyes. I was too young to understand people had things going on under the surface."

It was an old story now. Jinya, known as Jinta then, ran away from Edo with his younger sister, Suzune, at the age of five. His father had been abusing Suzune, so he refused to stay any longer.

The reason for his father's abuse was simple. His wife, their mother, had died during Suzune's birth, and one of Suzune's eyes was red. She was undeniably the child of a demon. As her mother was a human, it was clear the father had to be a demon. It was also likely the mother had not willingly participated in the act of conceiving Suzune. Their father loathed the demon that defiled and killed his wife, and he loathed Suzune as well. Unable to bear seeing his father's hate any longer, Jinya fled with Suzune.

The two had originally been from a wealthy merchant family here in Edo.

"After coming to know loss, I can kind of understand now. For seeing no solution beyond forsaking him, I owe Jyuuzou-dono so much."

Jinya had only thought of his sister and himself. He didn't think of the pain his father felt from losing his wife or the pain he would feel from losing his child. He hadn't considered that side of him at all, and he regretted that.

But now he felt relief. Jyuuzou had a daughter, one who loved him dearly. The man had a family again.

“What in the world are you talking about?” Natsu said with exasperation.

But Jinya had no intention of explaining further. The girl had no need to know the past. Jyuuzou had but one child now, and that was fine.

“Right, well... In short, it’s good to think about what one owes to their parents,” he said instead, cracking a soft smile. In some ways, Natsu was something like his younger sister. Perhaps that was why he could tolerate her temper so well.

“Huh...” She seemed to chew on his words.

“You consider Jyuuzou-dono to be your father, right?” he asked.

“Well, of course,” she said.

The lack of hesitation in her answer pleased Jinya. He felt reassured that Jyuuzou was no longer alone. Perhaps the fact he found solace in this redeemed him somewhat for being an unworthy son.

He had one regret left, however. In the end, he never got to learn the demon’s name. What could it have been? The demon was born from Natsu’s emotions, so perhaps it could be called “Natsu” as well. But it was also born from her love for her father, so perhaps it should be called “Love” instead.

But what about the other emotions that comprised the demon? What about the emotions of the mother longing for her lost daughter, a daughter forced upon her against her will by a demon, yet loved regardless, even beyond death? What name could such a demon have?

In the end, he would have to go unknowing.

“Take care of him then,” Jinya said. “He may look tough, but he’s more fragile than you’d think. Be there for him.”

“I’d do that even without you telling me,” Natsu replied.

He smiled warmly at her words, then turned. “Farewell then.” There was no gloom in his farewell. He took their gratitude with him and left Sugaya behind, walking straight ahead without looking back.

...His figure grew smaller as he walked away, until eventually he was lost to the tide of people.

“Has he left yet?” Jyuuzou appeared, looking in the direction Jinya had gone. Not a trace of the ronin could be seen.

“He has. Actually, why didn’t you come to see him off as well, after all he’s done for us?” Zenji asked.

“No need. I knew from the start that he’d get the job done, anyway.” Even as he spoke, Jyuuzou kept his gaze where Jinya had gone. He didn’t seem reluctant or regretful about their parting, just a bit sentimental. He was satisfied with how his life was now and didn’t cling to the past anymore. Still, old wounds occasionally ached.

“Is that so. You have a really high opinion of him, huh? Why is that?” Zenji asked. He felt Jyuuzou had been a bit odd when it came to Jinya.

“What kind of question is that?” Jyuuzou replied. The question was so off the mark that he couldn’t help but crack a nostalgic smile, one similar to the ronin’s. In a whisper, he said, “What kind of parent doesn’t recognize their own child?”

“Hm?”

His whisper went unheard by both Zenji and Natsu.

Jyuuzou couldn’t ask Jinya to stay, nor could he see him off. Jinya wouldn’t want that. The two traveled different paths now, and while that saddened Jyuuzou, he understood that was simply how it was. His son had grown to be his own man, and who was he to interfere?

“Um, sir?”

“Hurry up and get back to work, or you can kiss any hope of promotion goodbye.”

“Anything but that! Take care then, Miss Natsu.” Zenji scurried back into the shop in a hurry. The man could be careless at times, but he showed promise and had earned Natsu’s favor. Jyuuzou was planning to give him more work soon enough.

“U-um, Father!”

“Hmph?”

“I-Is there anything I can do to help too?” Natsu nervously asked.

Jyuuzou frowned at the unexpected question. Natsu was a loving daughter, but she kept to her own devices generally; this kind of question was a first from her. “What brought this on?”

“Um... I was just thinking about what I owe to my parent.” Embarrassed, she blushed a little.

Jyuuzou knew at once who put the idea in her head. How absurd. Still, something about how little his boy understood a parent’s feelings despite all these years warmed his heart. He said, “That’s not something you need worry about. The only duty a child owes a parent is to outlive them.”

“Father...”

“That alone is all I wish of you.”

His words were perhaps not just meant for her, but they wouldn’t reach the other recipient now. He patted her head and then turned to enter the store. She followed after him. Anyone watching would agree the two were the very image of a family.

Who is to say when exactly the rumors of demon sightings first began. Spirits freely marched the streets in droves by the night, reflecting the unease of the world. There was no stopping people from whispering amongst themselves, and so the dubious rumors of demon sightings continued unabated. Joining them, however, was a new rumor.

Hey, have you heard? Edo has a Yasha guardian now, to hunt our demons.

The Devourer

1

IT WAS NOW year six of the Kaei Era (1853 AD), spring.

“Not a lotta good news to be had lately, eh?”

Jinya was at Kihee, a soba restaurant in Fukagawa—part of Edo—where he’d been a frequent patron for the past few days. The restaurant owner deftly prepared some soba as he made conversation with a wry grin. Only worrisome news circulated these days. There was not much peace to be had for the average man.

“I hear them foreign boats keep sticking their noses into everything, but the people at the top aren’t doing a thing about it. One kake soba ready.”

“On it,” a lovely voice called. A short girl took the bowl. She looked to be around fourteen or fifteen years old and wore a peach-colored kimono. This was Ofuu, the restaurant owner’s only daughter. She and her forty-something father ran the place together. She walked carefully through the cramped restaurant and brought the soba over, but she was a little unsteady. Perhaps she was new to this? “H-here you are. One kake soba.” She forced a smile that looked more strained than shy as she put the bowl in front of Jinya. She had a shapely face and an attractive body, but her awkwardness kind of dashed it all.

Her father watched her work with worry. He said, “Well done, Ofuu. ... Anyway, I hear there’s a slasher on the loose too. Pretty worrying stuff for me, since I got my daughter to think about, you know? Honestly, what is the government even doing these days, anyway...”

That he praised Ofuu for simply carrying a bowl over hinted at the state of her usual performance. In any case, the times were troubling, as was the restaurant owner’s remark. Jinya grabbed a pair of chopsticks and slurped down a mouthful of noodles before chiding the restaurant owner in a low tone. “You should be careful of what you say.”

“I suppose. Wouldn’t want to earn the government’s ire and get the place

closed down, 'specially not when it hasn't even been ten days since we opened."

Jinya looked around. The walls didn't appear new. They weren't dirty, so to speak, but the wood bore the patina of age. "The restaurant doesn't seem all that new, though?" he said.

"That's 'cause we bought the place without refurbishing it. Got it real cheap, I tell ya."

"No kidding."

"You must really like my food though, seeing how you come to this sorry dump every day. Today makes your fifth day in a row, right?"

Business was poor for the restaurant; Jinya had not seen customers other than himself, which was strange even for a new establishment. That being said, the fact that the restaurant was so unpopular was precisely why he ate there.

Outwardly, Jinya appeared human, but his true identity was that of a demon. He had once been human, but he gave in to hatred and turned into a demon after his sister killed the woman he loved. For that reason, he purposefully chose this unpopular restaurant to eat at.

It had been more than ten years since he came to Edo, but his appearance hadn't changed one whit since he was eighteen—just as his sister's appearance hadn't changed for a long time. The life spans of demons stretched beyond a thousand years, but after a certain age, only their hair and nails continued to grow. Jinya was fine for now, but if he were to stay in Edo too long, somebody would eventually notice that he never aged. That was why he chose this unpopular soba restaurant with no regular customers. After some time, he planned to stop coming here and find somewhere else to eat. Anything to avoid falling under suspicion.

Jinya struggled to think of a reply when Ofuu stepped in and chided her father. "Dad! Are you trying to scare away our only customer?!"

"Calm down, Ofuu, we're just making small talk," the man replied. To Jinya, he said, "But really, what do you think of my soba?"

Jinya slurped down another mouthful. The soba wasn't terrible, but it wasn't

that great compared to the many other soba establishments around Edo. He answered, "It's not bad. It's just...terribly average."

"You sure don't mince your words! But that's all right, I know my cooking ain't great. I cook 'cause I love to, not 'cause I'm good at it," the restaurant owner said with a wry grin. Normally, Jinya would be chased out of a restaurant for rudely calling its food 'terribly average,' so this reaction was a surprise. It seemed the man had an objective view of his own ability.

"But, despite that, you opened a restaurant?"

"Yeah, well, I had my reasons. Everyone's got some history they don't wanna share—I'm sure even you have a few things you'd rather not."

"You're right about that," Jinya replied. The conversation met a natural end after that and Jinya asked no further questions, focused solely on eating.

"The whole slasher thing is quite worrying, though," Ofuu said. She often chatted with Jinya, perhaps because there weren't many other customers who came by.

"Ah... Yeah." His reply wasn't completely casual; those rumors did weigh on his mind. There were humans out there who fought demons. Back when he was human, he had cut down many demons himself. That meant this slasher could quite possibly be stronger than Jinya himself.

"You be careful out there, Jinya-kun. It's dangerous to be out at night," she said with a worried glance.

He didn't mind her chatting with him, but her tone struck him as a little odd. He still looked eighteen, but in truth he was thirty-one. He didn't know Ofuu's exact age, but she couldn't have been more than fifteen. It felt strange having a girl half his age worrying about him.

"Thanks, but I'm old enough to take care of myself," he said. "I'm not some child."

She giggled and replied, "From the way you're trying to sit straight to make yourself look taller, I have to disagree. You're still just a child to me."

Good grief. Why was it that women always seemed to treat Jinya like a kid?

Jeez, Jinta. You can't do anything without—

No. Enough. Don't think of her.

He severed the rising emotion at its base.

"Thanks for the food. How much is it?" Without so much as a twitch of the brow, he returned his bowl.

Ever since Jinya left Kadono and came to live in Edo, he'd learned many new tricks, such as how to hide his red eyes and how to temper his emotions. Ruefully, he thought how pathetic it was that he'd grown so skilled at such petty things.

"That'll be sixteen mon."²

Jinya handed over the exact amount. The restaurant owner started counting the coins and, with some surprise, said, "For a ronin, you're sure not hard up for money."

"I guess. I find consistent work."

"What kind of work, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Demon hunting."

"Well, ain't that somethin'. Are you gonna head off to the Palace of the Dragon King after you're done with all the demons?" joked the restaurant owner. He didn't seem to believe Jinya much.

Jinya was, of course, serious. Demons existed in Edo, and they were not few in number. It was the job of those like himself to make sure the defenseless did not fall victim to them. Occasionally a merchant, a retainer of the Shogun, or an otherwise wealthy individual would request his services, so there was money to be found in the work. Most importantly, however, the work allowed Jinya a chance to hone his skills. Welcome as it was, the money was merely a side benefit.

"Yep, that's sixteen. Thank you very much!" The restaurant owner finished counting and bowed. Ofuu bowed as well, gracefully.

Jinya had no work tonight. With his belly full, he figured he'd wander the streets, keeping an ear out for any strange rumors. But he only made it a few

steps out of the soba restaurant when he heard the restaurant owner call out to him from behind.

“Oh yeah. Speaking of demons, they say the bodies of those killed in the slashings didn’t have wounds that were inflicted by a sword.”

Jinya stopped in his tracks.

“Apparently, they all looked like they were cut up by some beast or somethin’. The number of bodies don’t add up either.”

“Don’t add up how?” Jinya asked.

“Well, lately there’ve been more people going missing than there are bodies found. Don’t know if they were abducted or spirited away or what, but it’s got people sayin’ it might be a demon at work. You know...because demons like to swallow people whole.” The restaurant owner grinned wickedly as though trying to scare Jinya.

But Jinya was unfazed. “Please, tell me more.”

Edobashi Bridge was built around forty years after Tokugawa Ieyasu made Edo the capital in 1603 AD, and it was therefore one of the larger bridges spanning the Nihonbashi River. Both townsfolk and merchants who peddled wares by foot could be seen on the bridge by day, but not a soul could be seen there now, come twilight.

This was where a slashing had taken place—although it might not be appropriate to call it that, when the bodies had been left so brutally mangled as though savaged by a beast. Regardless, rumor had it that a demon was behind the incident, and bridges were thought to link the human world to the spirit world, so this was the ideal place for a demon to appear.

It was early spring, and the night breeze brought with it a lingering trace of winter’s chill. Jinya folded his arms and leaned back on the bridge railing, remaining vigilant of his surroundings. The moon in the sky above was cloaked in a thin veil of fog, his clothes were gently damp with evening dew, and faint, pale moonlight shone down. It was a fine night. It would be a shame if a demon appeared and ruined it.

While Jinya didn't show outward exasperation, he still felt it inside and let out a sigh. After nothing of note happened for some time, he got off the railing and began to walk away. It seemed he wasn't lucky enough to just chance upon the slasher. An annoying waste of time, but he didn't let it get to him too much. If the slasher were careless enough to appear before Jinya, they'd have been caught by local law enforcement long ago...or at least, an ordinary slasher would. If this slasher was a demon as rumored, then the magistrate would be helpless. Jinya hoped to finish this trouble before there were more victims, but without knowing the slasher's whereabouts, he could do nothing but wait.

"Damn..." he mumbled. His body was that of a demon's now, but that didn't mean he was all-capable. His strengths were limited in scope, so he would have to settle for searching on foot. Reality often instilled a sense of powerlessness in both humans and demons.

No point grumbling about it. He focused again.

"Heeelp...!" He heard the hoarse shriek of a woman.

Jinya bounded off in the direction it came from. On his right he saw Aramebashi Bridge and, past it, the Shianbashi Bridge spanning the Eastern Horidome River.

Despite the proximity to the river, the air was rank with the thick scent of blood. On the Shianbashi Bridge, he found three brutalized corpses. Jinya looked around but saw no assailant. He had been a hair too late. He knelt down by a corpse and leaned close. The ragdoll-limp bodies were gory enough to make most avert their gaze, but not Jinya. He was no stranger to death by now.

Gently, he touched one of the corpses. The wound on it was still warm, but it wasn't a sharp cut—it was roughly gouged. Just as he'd heard, this was not the work of a sword. Perhaps claws, then. It seemed even more likely that the rumored slasher was a demon.

"...Hm?"

Something was off, however.

The three corpses were all men. But the voice he'd heard was that of a young woman.

He thought of what the soba restaurant owner said—*demons like to swallow people whole*. The man had said it in jest, but perhaps he had hit the mark.

Sadly, there was no more information to be gleaned from the scene. Jinya stood, then began walking away.

That was when he heard a sound close by.

The sound of wind sliced and rushing.

A sound he'd heard many times before.

His body moved faster than his mind could process, reflexively dodging away from the noise.

"Ngh..." He was a moment late and got his right arm nicked, his short-sleeve kimono cut and slowly staining with blood. The wound was shallow, however, and wouldn't hinder him.

The problem was understanding what just happened. It took him a moment to process. He knew that sound by heart: It was the same one he made when he swung his sword. His wound made it clear the attack was real. But there wasn't a soul around him. No assailant to be found.

He heard the sound again, coming from the front, and dodged backwards. Now his chest was cut.

It seemed he couldn't detect the assailant until the moment they attacked. Even now, after that second attack, he didn't see anybody around.

A third attack followed, but this time without any sound. Pain ran through his body as a blade tried to pierce the skin of his back. He quickly dodged away from the direction of the attack.

His skin had been torn, but this was no time to care. He focused sharply on his surroundings but found only the same empty silence. No assailant to be seen, yet he was wounded all the same. That, combined with the rumors the slasher was a demon, drove Jinya to one conclusion.

"...I see. This must be your power."

The slasher was a superior demon with a unique power, most likely one that allowed them to mask their presence. But they couldn't eliminate the sound

they made, and the demon himself was not all that strong. They lacked the strength to kill barehanded, which was why they used a sword. If that was so, then Jinya could fight them. He'd rather not use this method if he could, but he wasn't strong enough to fight this demon without it.

"At least there are no survivors..."

It was only logical to use every tool at one's disposal. He closed his eyes. There was a sickening, audible throb as the muscles of his left arm swelled, becoming grotesque and dark red. He opened his eyes again, revealing irises changed from brown to red.

"...So I don't have to hide this."

The assailant didn't stop, even after Jinya revealed his demon nature. Jinya felt his skin cut, but it was only a needle-prick of pain. His body was harder to pierce now that he'd taken on demonic form.

He swept his arm in the space he thought the enemy demon's sword might be and heard a crack as it snapped. The unseen demon's sword was of poor make, likely mass-produced, and couldn't withstand a demon's strength.

A sword tip appeared out of thin air and fell to the ground. It seemed that only objects in direct contact with the demon's body were hidden. In that case, landing a single blow to make the demon bleed should render its power moot.

Jinya took a battle stance with his sword in his right hand, and braced himself. He was prepared to strike in a wide arc the moment he felt anything touch his skin.

"Ready when you are, slasher," he said. His words would make for an amusing moment if the demon had already fled, something he had no way of knowing.

What'll it be? he wondered.

The space before him wavered and a demon of small build— about five shaku tall, a full head shorter than Jinya—revealed itself. The demon seemed male, his skin a murky black, his shoulders narrow. He was weak after all, then. Of note was his right eye. It was far larger than the left and even the white of it was red. It was hard to tell where the right eye was looking, and the skin around it was misshapen, like a severely angular metal mask. The right half of his face was

swollen as well, which only made the right eye stand out more.

In his hand was the broken sword. There was no mistaking it—this demon was the assailant.

“...My name is Jinya. Name yourself before I cut you down.” He had no clue why the demon chose to reveal himself, but Jinya figured he might as well exchange names. He regretted not asking for the name of a demon he killed long ago and had since resolved to bear the weight of all the lives he took. This small courtesy was the least he could offer them.

“I’m Mosuke.”

Jinya didn’t expect to receive a straightforward response like this. Mosuke was a folksy name too, a bit odd for a superior demon. He lacked the powerful air of a superior demon as well. Still, his ability to disappear was a problem, and Jinya couldn’t let his guard down.

“I see. I won’t forget it. Die in peace knowing you will be remembered,” he said. He gritted his teeth and gripped his sword tight. Leaning forward, he was ready to step in and slice when—

“Wait! I have no intent to fight you!” Mosuke threw his sword aside and held his arms up in surrender.

“...Hm?” Jinya stopped and glared, still leaning forward, primed to attack. “What do you mean? Are you not the one who attacked me first?”

“Well... That was because I thought you were the slasher. I had heard a rumor that the slasher was a demon, and you smell like a demon, so I assumed it was you when I saw you here. But it seems you figured it was me as well. I guess it’s a bit of an odd situation.”

“So that’s why you revealed yourself.” It wasn’t so unbelievable. Mosuke didn’t seem like the sort who’d kill. But Jinya couldn’t be sure this wasn’t an act. He frowned in doubt and asked, “But what’s a demon doing hunting down a slasher?”

“What say you we get away from here first? Before somebody comes along.”

Jinya looked around and sized up the situation. A bunch of corpses and two grotesque monsters. Hard to explain that one. He returned to his human form, then sheathed his sword.

Mosuke took that as Jinya extending the olive branch and smiled toothily. **“How about we head back to my place to talk?”**

2

A DOG HOWLED in the distance. Night grew deeper by the moment, and the moon had been draped in a thin gossamer cloud when Jinya saw it last. The room he was in had no window to see out of, but he was sure the streets of Edo were bathed in a pale light right about now.

He sat in a room with space for about four-and-a-half tatami mats, which was hardly anything. The tatami was old, and the walls discolored. The place had clearly been built long ago, and was well lived-in too, judging from the clutter.

“...You live here?” Jinya said, half in astonishment and half in disbelief. The place Mosuke led him to was a back-alley row house not too far from the Kanda River. The row house had homes on the main street as well, but the back alley was for poorer townsfolk who could only afford single-room dwellings.

“Of course. Live long enough and any demon can figure out how to appear human,” a man answered, while setting a teacup full of clear liquid before Jinya. “Some demons even live as humans. We may not be able to lie, but we can still hide the truth. In fact, aren’t you doing the same?” The man’s short-sleeve kimono was covered in sewn-on patches, and he had his hair in a topknot. It was hard to believe, given how much he looked like an ordinary, down-on-his-luck townsman, but this was Mosuke, the demon who Jinya met only a short while ago. Mosuke lived here disguised as a human. Even his eyes were a normal dark brown. He wasn’t a superior demon for nothing, it seemed; his human guise was perfect. “Here. Don’t worry, it’s not poisoned or anything.”

“Poison wouldn’t kill me anyway,” Jinya said. “Thank you.” He took the teacup and saw that it held liquor, not tea. He sipped. Watery. The cheap stuff, further cut with water. A bowl of soba cost sixteen mon, but a single bottle of sake was

worth around thirty mon: a princely sum for all but the affluent, so ordinary folk generally drank their liquor cut with water.

“Allow me to reintroduce myself. I’m Mosuke, a humble townsperson who lives in this back-alley row house.”

“...And who is actually a demon.”

“Yes. Humble though I am, I’ve managed to live past a hundred years and become a superior demon.”

Mosuke lacked the air of a superior demon though. In fact, he might even be weaker than most of the lower demons Jinya had killed before.

“For a superior demon, you’re a little...” Jinya hesitated to be so direct.

“Weak?”

“...Yeah, that.” It seemed Mosuke didn’t mind all that much.

“But of course. Being a superior demon has nothing to do with strength, it’s just how we refer to demons who’ve awoken their unique powers. There are many superior demons out there who are slower and weaker than lower demons—such as myself.”

Now that he mentioned it, the demon with *Farsight* that Jinya met long ago wasn’t particularly strong. It seemed that even without a unique power specialized in combat, a demon was considered superior so long as it had *any* unique power.

Satisfied, Jinya got to the real issue at hand. “Okay, to be clear...you are not the slasher, correct?”

“I am not. And neither are you, I understand.”

Jinya stared into Mosuke’s eyes. The man held his gaze unwaveringly. If this were an act, it was a rather good one. For now, Jinya believed him. “All right. I trust you.”

“Thank you very much.”

“It seems like you’re trying to chase down this slasher. Or rather, you want to kill them, seeing as you didn’t even stop to question me. Why?”

“A personal grudge,” Mosuke said firmly, with no hesitation. Perhaps he had been waiting for this question, or perhaps his grudge was simply all he had on his mind. He looked calm, but his tone was cold. “Have you heard the rumors of people being spirited away?”

“I have. The number of people going missing and the number of bodies left in the wake of the slasher don’t add up, so people think some are either abducted or spirited away, right? Just earlier, I heard a woman scream but couldn’t find her corpse.”

“She was abducted, then,” Mosuke said matter-of-factly. “The slasher has only killed men so far and abducts every woman, without fail.”

Jinya gave Mosuke a questioning look, wondering how he could be so sure.

Mosuke bit his lip hard. A short but tense silence followed. Eventually, he hung his head and wearily said, “My wife was taken as well.” His shoulders trembled as his eyes clouded and his hands clenched. The anger pouring from him erased all of Jinya’s lingering doubts—Mosuke was not the slasher. Such anger could not possibly be faked. “She was a human, and yet she loved a demon like me. She was so kind. But one night a month ago, she disappeared. She was found floating dead in the Kanda River some ten days later. An official from the magistrate’s office told me there were signs of sexual assault on her body.”

Men were killed and women were abducted, plus Mosuke’s wife bore signs of sexual assault. If that were all true, then this was certainly no simple case of people being spirited away. Something much more depraved was going on.

“Do you find my story too much to believe?” Mosuke asked.

“No, I believe you. We demons can’t lie in the first place,” Jinya replied.

“That’s true.” Mosuke gulped down his drink, then spoke in his firmest tone yet. “She was a kind soul, the type who’d always put others before herself. To even love a demon like me... She didn’t deserve a death like that.”

Mosuke’s fist clenched tight and a wave of fury emanated from him. Jinya understood the anger the man felt. He knew what it was like to lose the woman he loved. And yet, he had no sympathy for Mosuke.

“Jinya-san,” Mosuke continued, “I live disguised as a human now, but that doesn’t mean I like all humans. From living as one, I’ve come to know their ugliness. Even so, I managed to fall in love with one who accepted my grotesque form. But now I have so much anger for the slasher that defiled her and robbed me of my beloved. I don’t know what to do with all this anger.” He fought to hold down something unknown rising within himself, his eyes bloodshot and his jaw clenched. It was a painful sight to behold.

The emotion Jinya felt in this moment was wrong for the situation. Instead of sympathy, he felt a faint envy. Envy for Mosuke, and for how he had a proper target for his hate. Envy for how Mosuke’s hate wasn’t indecisive like Jinya’s. Envy for how proper Mosuke’s hate was.

Jinya grew wise to his own envy and tried to wash it away with sake. The alcohol was watery, but the feeling of it gliding down his throat was good. He replied, “I see...”

“That’s why I don’t want you to help me. If this slasher is to be killed, it needs to be by my hands alone.”

“Hm...” Jinya found he couldn’t quite agree to the request. He had his own reasons for wanting to slay this slasher—or rather, the demon—as well. Even knowing how deep Mosuke’s hatred ran, Jinya wouldn’t give up so easily.

After a short pause, Mosuke said, “What’re you after then, Jinya-san?” He kept an eye on Jinya’s expression, trying to gauge him.

“Well, if the slasher is truly a demon, then I’d like to kill them myself.” In truth, Jinya’s goal lay in the moment right after he slayed the demon, but he didn’t say that much.

“...I see. Then instead of getting in one another’s way, how about we work together to search? We can split up, then meet to share information. I only ask that you let the actual killing be done by me.”

This appeared to be the best compromise Mosuke could allow himself. Jinya wasn’t rude enough to decline the man’s efforts to meet him halfway, so he nodded and said, “All right, I’m fine with that. But are you really sure you want to be the one to do it?”

“You doubt that I want to?”

“No. But I doubt your resolve.” Jinya narrowed his gaze. “Whether demon or human, anyone would hesitate to take another’s life. Will you be able to accept what you’ve done once you’ve given in to anger and killed?”

“I...” Mosuke paused.

“I can. I’ve killed for a long time. But you are not like me. If you feel any hesitation at all towards killing, then I recommend you reconsider. And as luck would have it, there’s a scumbag who can kill without hesitation sitting right before you. There’s no reason for you to dirty your own hands.”

Mosuke contemplated it for a moment but soon shook his head. He scowled, his jaw tight. “Thank you very much for the offer, but at the end of the day I am nothing more than a demon. I’ve already made avenging my wife my sole purpose, so—”

“So you’ll fulfill it even if it means death...right?”

“Yes. That is what it means to be a demon. If I don’t kill the one who killed my wife, I don’t think I can go on with life.”

Jinya had always known how Mosuke would answer. This was just the way it was for demons. But even so, Jinya had to say it: There is no need to give in to your hate. There are other ways through this.

Perhaps those words were simply meant for himself.

“I see. I’ll try my best to respect your wishes then,” Jinya said. “However, if I come across the slasher first, then I might have no choice.”

“I understand. I can only curse my luck if that happens. I won’t hold it against you,” Mosuke said with a smile. Whether he said it out of a desire to look strong, or out of consideration for Jinya was unknowable, but his bitterness—overshadowing his anger—was visibly apparent.

Jinya did the kind thing and shut his eyes, saying nothing.

Starting the next day, the two began searching Edo by night. They failed to find the slasher though, only occasionally coming across the scene of some

slashings all too late.

“The slasher? Sorry, I don’t know nothing about that.”

“No clue. Haven’t seen anything myself.”

“And why should I answer you, huh? Who are you anyway?”

They tried asking around with no luck. Today was their third day with no progress.

“Yet another night with nothing to show for it, huh? Tough break,” Mosuke said.

“It is what it is,” Jinya replied.

“I suppose. We’ll just have to keep at it.”

The two met up mid-search to exchange information, but they both had nothing notable to share. They couldn’t find any leads the rest of the night either, so they trudged back to Mosuke’s abode empty-handed. Once there, they sat face-to-face and drank for what was their third night.

Mosuke seemed to tamp down thoughts of revenge as he drank, looking relatively relaxed. When Jinya asked why that was, Mosuke answered, “Nothing beats sharing a drink with an equal.”

Jinya felt he understood the sentiment. He and Mosuke were both demons living amongst humans. For them, it was rare to find companions one could be with without hiding anything. Jinya himself unexpectedly enjoyed the company.

“Ah... That hits the spot,” Mosuke said after downing a teacup of sake. Today’s sake wasn’t the cheap stuff but a premium sake imported from Kamigata that Jinya bought. Brewing techniques weren’t all that advanced in the Edo area; most of its sake was cloudy and unrefined. That’s why good, clear sake had to be imported from Kamigata—what people called Kyoto and the area around it. Kamigata sake was a luxury the average man could rarely enjoy, but Jinya’s last job paid well so he’d splurged a little. “Thanks for buying such nice stuff,” Mosuke said.

Jinya replied, “Not at all. It’s only right I do my share after you’ve been treating me to drinks these past few nights.” Nice sake was better enjoyed with

another anyway, he figured.

The sake was delicious. Even without an accompanying snack, it was well worth its price. How long had it been since Jinya last enjoyed sake like this? The two of them had nothing to show for the night's search, but you'd think the opposite from their expressions.

"Oh yeah, so why is it you're hunting down our kind anyway?" Mosuke asked. The question seemed to just cross his mind by chance. Mosuke was motivated by revenge, but Jinya had said he wanted to kill the slasher if they were a demon, which was a curious thing to say.

Jinya froze. What should he say? Should he tell Mosuke how he used to be a human? But demons and humans got along like oil and water, and Jinya didn't want to see these nights of drinking come to an end.

He hesitated a moment, and a short silence ensued. He came to a quick decision, however, and soberly said, "I used to be a human. I became a demon from the hate I felt when another demon killed the woman I loved, but my values still remain close to that of a human's. That's why I find it right to kill demons who bring harm to humans."

He downed his drink. He valued his connection with Mosuke, and that was why he didn't want to lie to him. If that meant the nights of drinking together would come to an end, then so be it.

"I see. Oh, here, let me pour you another cup." Mosuke showed no sign he particularly cared and refilled Jinya's teacup.

Jinya was surprised. He expected Mosuke to show some distaste at the very least. "You don't mind?"

"Nope. We demons are, for the most part, all individualists. It's not rare to hear of demons killing their own, plus we're not virtuous enough to care about the deaths of strangers." With a smile, he added, "I care more about my drinking buddies than some guy I've never met."

Jinya was a demon who hunted other demons for human reasons. He figured that such hypocrisy was something that would invite disgust, but it seemed that it was no more than a mildly interesting topic to go with the alcohol. He said,

“But I used to be a human.”

“Whatever your past, you’re a demon now, and that makes you my equal.”

“I suppose...” Jinya still had a hard time accepting it and made a face.

Mosuke laughed at his expression and downed his drink. He let out a sigh reeking of alcohol and genially said, with a firm grasp still on his teacup, “Did you know the cuckoo lays its eggs in the nests of other birds?”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah. The other bird does all they can to raise those chicks that aren’t their own, and the cuckoo chicks grow up thinking the other bird is their parent. It doesn’t matter who birthed them; to the chick, the one who raised them is the true parent. Isn’t it strange how a bird can disregard the circumstances of their birth, but we can’t do the same?”

Mosuke spoke rather cheerfully. He smiled with delight as Jinya filled his teacup, then downed it like it were a delicacy. Perhaps this was his way of trying to cheer Jinya up. In place of thanks, Jinya smiled back.

Mosuke continued, “It doesn’t matter whether one was born a demon, or human, or whatever. If you’re a demon, you’re a demon, simple as that. The only people that care to categorize people by origin are humans.”

“Can’t argue against that,” Jinya said with a wry grin. He sipped his drink. The sake was just as good as before.

“So, you hunt demons to protect humans then?” Mosuke asked.

“No,” Jinya replied without a moment’s delay. He had failed to guard the woman he loved and had struck his own dear family. A sorry excuse for a man like him had no right to claim he protected others. “I have many reasons, but my main one right now is money.”

“Ah, money.”

“Humans hate demons, enough so that they want them dead the moment rumors crop up. I take money from those kinds of people and hunt demons... Do you find that disgraceful?”

“No, not at all. You don’t strike me as the type to do anything without a

reason. You mainly kill demons who harm humans, right? I mean, why else would you leave me alive? Besides..." Mosuke took an exaggerated gulp, leaning far back as he downed his drink. "What right have I got to speak when I'm enjoying a drink bought with that 'dirty' money?"

The two of them had a good laugh at his joke. It truly had been a long time since Jinya tasted alcohol this good, or laughed this much. Perhaps it was the light mood that made the drink taste better.

Their laughter subsided after a while, and their drinking continued. When they had just about drunk the whole bottle, Mosuke asked yet another question. "So, what're your other reasons then?"

"You've got a lot of questions today."

"Well, I've already told you everything about myself. It's only right that I hear my fair share about you too."

Is that right? Jinya wondered. Still, it wasn't like he had anything to hide from a fellow demon. "...I'm also hunting demons to get stronger. I live to stop a particular demon one day." Now that he thought about it, this was the first time he'd told anyone else about this. His mind sobered a bit. It was unpleasant to acknowledge one's own weakness, even if he knew it to be true.

"Is that so. Wait, stop them, not kill them?"

"I'll decide whether I kill them or not when I meet them. But either way, I need to be stronger."

"Sounds complicated."

"Not really. I'm just too weak-willed to make up my mind."

The demon who could see the future said a calamity, bringing ruin to all of mankind, would appear in Kadono more than a hundred years in the future. In due time, that calamity would be called the Demon God, but Jinya knew her as Suzune—the one who killed his beloved, and his very own sister.

He solely sought power to stop her one day. But he still didn't know what Suzune's intent was. He wanted to save her, but he couldn't part with the hatred smoldering inside of him. He wanted to kill her, but he couldn't part with

the happy memories he saw when he closed his eyes. It had been thirteen years since he left Kadono, but he still hadn't found the purpose for which he wielded his blade. He winced at his own pathos.

"What will you do after you've avenged your wife?" Jinya asked, partly to change the topic, but partly out of genuine curiosity. While their situations were different, they had both lost someone dear. He wanted to see what would lie beyond Mosuke's revenge, for reference.

"Nothing in particular."

Jinya felt a bit bewildered by the answer, precisely because he could tell it was genuine.

"I'm only living disguised among humans because I don't like fighting, you see. It's a bother to live as a demon. Humans constantly try to kill you, and demons are so selfish that they'll clash with their own kind over simple differences of opinion. I dislike all that, so I've chosen to live as a human. I'm fine with spending my days lazing about. I'd never have thought to use my powers to kill if it weren't for...all this." He sipped his sake without a care in the world, his expression only scowling for a brief instant.

The sake must've had a kick, Jinya decided and chose to think no deeper of it.

Mosuke continued, "I was happy enough just living unnoticed in the shadows, letting the days pass by...together with my wife. I'll probably go back to the quiet life after I avenge her." He gave a tired chuckle and said, "Heh, maybe I can include visiting her grave in my routine."

Jinya felt bad for bringing the topic up, but it would be rude to apologize. So instead, he said, "...We can't change who we are, huh?"

"No, we cannot," Mosuke agreed.

Silence. The two drank without saying a word for some time. The mood had sobered completely.

"Oh yeah..." Jinya began, with his eyes cast down. He didn't want to meet Mosuke's gaze because of his current broody mood but also because what he had to say was dark. "Earlier you said I wasn't the type to do something without reason." He threw his teacup back and drank. "But that was wrong. I hate my

sister for no good reason.” The sake gliding down his throat tasted foul like blood.

The next day, Jinya went to Kihee in the evening. He wanted to eat some soba before heading out for the night’s search with Mosuke.

“Oh, welcome, Jinya-kun!” Greeting him was Ofuu, with perfect posture and a smile. She had a hairpin modeled after a Japanese iris holding her hair in place today. “The usual kake soba?”

“Please.”

“Right away. Dad! One kake!”

“Got it!” the restaurant owner responded, then quickly got to work.

Jinya chose a random spot to sit. Ofuu stood near him and whispered, even though there were no other customers present to possibly overhear. “Any luck finding that slasher?”

Jinya raised a brow at her question. He hadn’t told her about Mosuke or anything. How did she know he was looking for the slasher? He asked, “How’d you know I was looking for them?”

“Oh, please. You said that hunting demons was your job. Obviously that means you chase rumors of demons too.”

It seemed there was no reason for him to be suspicious of her: She simply took the lighthearted things he said before as truth. Of course, it really *was* the truth, but only the naivest—or perhaps the most astute—would actually believe it. Maybe one simply had to be ignorant enough of the ways of the world to take everything at face value. Jinya couldn’t figure her out.

Ofuu ducked down to Jinya’s sitting height and expectantly awaited an answer. Something told him she’d wait as long as she had to. With a sigh, he gave in and answered, “No, I’ve had no luck finding them.” He had no story to tell anyway, given his lack of progress.

“Oh, that’s too bad. But don’t let it get you down.”

“I’m fine. I didn’t expect it to be easy in the first place. A job well done takes

effort and persistence, whether it be in demon hunting or running a restaurant.” He looked around to see the soba restaurant was as empty as ever. The only customer other than him was a well-dressed young samurai. Business was certainly not booming.

“Aha ha, yes, the restaurant’s still not doing all too well,” Ofuu said with a wry grin. She seemed to be having a good time, however.

“Edo must be incredibly busy if nobody’s stopping to take notice of such a pretty waitress. A shame.”

“Oh, please, you flatter me.” Ofuu blushed and smiled. Though clumsy when it came to serving, she was good at conversation and modest about her looks.

“Oh, have you taken an interest in my daughter?” The restaurant owner stuck his head out from the kitchen, having overheard them with how small the restaurant was. Jinya was sure the man was about to complain, but instead he smiled and said, “Ofuu’s a real beauty, ain’t she?”

“...Most would probably say so.” Jinya tried to avoid giving a direct answer.

The restaurant owner undid his apron and stepped out of the kitchen. He approached Jinya and jovially slapped him on the back. “I see, I see! Well, you got a good eye, Mister! Any interest in taking my daughter as your bride and working this restaurant yourself? I’m sure demon hunting ain’t bad work, but running a small restaurant as a pair’s pretty good too, you know?”

Jinya was flummoxed by the suddenness of the proposition. What kind of person offered their daughter to a customer hardly more than a stranger?

Ofuu looked even more taken aback than Jinya, blushing bright red and yelling, “Dad?! What in the world are you doing?!”

“Just trying to find you a man is all.”

“I can do that myself, thank you very much!” Despite calming down a little, she continued to admonish her father, who had turned meek by this point. Jinya was sidelined with no chance to even answer. His soba still hadn’t been made either.

The restaurant owner said, “But I really do think it’s about time you find

yourself a man or two. I know full well you ain't never had a boyfriend."

"Th-that's true, but I can deal with that stuff when the time comes! Besides, you're bothering Jinya-kun!"

"Perhaps, but I'm worried for you. I'm getting on in years and want to make sure you're in good hands."

Apparently Jinya qualified as "good hands" somehow, which was strange. He hadn't really done anything to earn the man's appreciation. Furthermore, he was a ronin with inconsistent work. Why would anyone want to leave their daughter to him?

"I'm happy you're being so thoughtful, but I have my own thoughts on the matter, Dad," Ofuu said.

"All righty then. But I do think you two would make a great pair," he grumbled.

Ofuu hung her head sulkily. When she finally looked up, her eyes seemed a bit saddened. "Jeez, Dad. You just can't wait to be rid of me." She puffed her cheeks out, looking much more childish than usual. From the sound of things, Jinya wasn't the first to receive such a sudden proposition. Perhaps every young man that came by was asked something similar by her father.

"That's not it, I just—"

"I know. You're just worried for me." She appeared angry, but the love in her voice was apparent. She was saddened by her father's haste to marry her off, while her father just wanted her to marry and be happy. Their discord was born from how much they cared for one another.

"Don't worry, I'll start my own family one day for sure. But let me be your daughter for a little while longer." She smiled a beautiful, gentle smile, like a blooming flower.

"Sorry for sticking my nose where it didn't belong." Defeated by her smile, the restaurant owner returned to the kitchen, dejected.

After confirming her father was back in the kitchen, she bowed to Jinya, deeply apologetic. "I'm sorry about that."

“Not at all.” After all, it was a heartwarming display.

In the kitchen, the restaurant owner was finally making soba again. Jinya glanced at his face from the side but couldn't quite read him. Still, it was clear he cared for his daughter and that his daughter loved him back. This was how a family should be—a far cry from how his own had been.

“He's a good father,” Jinya said.

“I think so too,” Ofuu replied with a beaming smile, so bright Jinya had to avert his eyes. That her smile hurt to look at—it was proof of how twisted he was inside.

“I'm not sure if it's my place to ask, but...was your father not the same?” she asked with a worried look. It seemed she could read him like an open book.

He had no reason to tell her the truth, or tell her anything at all, for that matter. But he told her anyway. Perhaps he just wanted someone to listen.

“I...have a younger sister, Suzune. My father treated her terribly, saying she wasn't his child. Even abandoning her. So I took her and we ran away together... Anyway, it's all ancient history now.” He omitted mentioning why his father had abandoned Suzune. He didn't want to hear Ofuu say it was only common sense to abandon a demon child.

“Do you hate your father?” she asked.

“No. Now I understand where he was coming from. But...”

These days he had the perspective to understand his father a little better. Suzune was likely the result of a demon violating her mother. His mother was both sullied by a demon, then killed by bearing that demon's child, so it was no wonder his father took things out on Suzune. After losing Shirayuki, Jinya understood that hatred was a powerful emotion that could drown even feelings of love. That's why he couldn't blame his father anymore. He had no right to. He ultimately abandoned Suzune himself, after all.

“But...?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking how so many things are out of our hands.” He frowned slightly and pretended to not notice Ofuu's worried gaze. Through his

mind flitted thoughts of Mosuke, of Ofuu and her father, of himself, of lost loved ones and prisons of hate, and of discord born out of mutual love. “Some things just can’t be settled so easily.”

This world was truly an unfair place. Our emotions weren’t ours to control. There’s no choosing who we love, or who we hate. All we did was live and die, so why was life so hard?

3

“NOTHING ON MY END.”

Nighttime, spring. Jinya glanced up at the dark sky and saw a full moon just beginning to wane. There was a certain charm to it, cloaked in cloud and mist as it was, but now wasn’t the time to indulge. Mosuke’s voice held a hint of dejection.

The two of them had met up on Aramebashi Bridge to share information, but again there was really nothing to share. They’d searched Edo nightly but had yet to find the slasher.

“Anything on yours?” Mosuke asked.

“Nothing.”

“I see. Hmm. Maybe we need to change our methods a little.”

There hadn’t been any victims these past few days, so things were relatively peaceful. Still, the slasher couldn’t be left at large. The blind search wasn’t getting them anywhere, but they had no better ideas. In the end, they decided to continue searching on foot and occasionally question people, even knowing that it was getting them nowhere.

“Oh?” After some walking, Mosuke spoke up in surprise.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look.” He pointed to a line of healthy willow trees lining the edge of the neatly-dug Kanda River. Under one of the willows was a girl, specifically...

“Ofuu?” Jinya said.

The girl wore a light-pink kimono and had a distinctive straight posture. She touched a willow branch lovingly with one hand, and she looked ephemeral under the moonlight, a complete disconnect from her usual cheerful but clumsy self.

“Somebody you know?” Mosuke asked.

“Just someone who works at this soba place I frequent,” Jinya explained succinctly.

“That right? It’s not good for a girl to be out this late alone, though.” Mosuke frowned. There hadn’t been slashings these past few days, but it was still dangerous.

Jinya would lose sleep if an acquaintance of his died because he didn’t step in. “Sorry, do you mind if we...?”

“Not at all.” Mosuke smiled understandingly.

Jinya figured he’d at least urge her to go home, or maybe even walk her home if she was willing. It was the least he could do to repay the soba restaurant for being so good to him.

“Oh my, Jinya-kun?” A sudden night breeze blew by, stirring the willows. Ofuu’s gaze followed the breeze, and she happened to meet Jinya’s eyes as he crossed the bridge. He froze at the sight of her beneath the willows and bathed in moonlight. Her smile was so fleetingly soft, as though it could fade at any moment. The difference between her right now and how she was at Kihee bewildered him momentarily. “Lovely moon tonight, isn’t it?” Her soft, slow tone suited the moonlit night well. Her graceful manner left an impression on him, making him think this transient, fragile girl was perhaps the real Ofuu, not the cheerful, strong girl he was familiar with. “Are you out for a walk by yourself?” she asked.

A strange thing to ask, Jinya thought. He looked to the side and realized Mosuke was gone. He checked his surroundings to make doubly sure, but it was just him and Ofuu around.

He then heard a whisper in his ear: *“Sorry, but I’ll be making myself scarce here.”*

The voice was faint, but Jinya could hear a hint of teasing in its tone and frowned in exasperation, showing some rare emotion. He understood now. Mosuke had intentionally gone invisible.

“Go walk the girl home. You wouldn’t want her to be attacked by the slasher, now would you?” Mosuke was clearly enjoying this, having misunderstood Jinya’s relation with Ofuu. Jinya wanted to set things straight, but talking to thin air would just make Ofuu think he was crazy, so he froze up instead. He could only hope Mosuke wasn’t the type to snoop and had already left. To think he’d use his power for such a mundane reason, though...

“Is something the matter?” Ofuu asked.

“...No, not really. I was just thinking about something. More importantly, what are you doing out here this late?” he asked a little firmly.

She seemed to ignore his tone, however, calmly replying, “I was admiring the cherry blossoms.” Her gaze moved to a willow, and she gracefully reached out and touched one of its drooping branches again, with the same kindness a mother would show her child. The branch swayed, the rustling of its leaves soothing to the ear.

“Isn’t this a willow?” Jinya said.

“Take a closer look.” She touched a white flower on the tree. It was hard to tell from a distance, but the drooping branches were abloom with small, five-petaled, white flowers. “It’s called a snow willow because its branches droop like a willow tree from the flowers’ weight, but it’s actually a kind of cherry blossom tree.”

Jinya approached the tree and saw flowers that looked like large snowflakes piled atop one another. A cherry blossom tree reminiscent of both snow and willows: a spring bloomer with the charm of winter. How odd, yet elegant. “A snow willow, huh?” he muttered its name, pondering it.

Another night breeze blew, and the snow willow’s branches swayed. It was a cherry blossom tree, yet it still looked like a willow no matter how much he stared at it. Most would probably agree, in fact.

“It looks nothing like a cherry blossom tree, huh...” he said.

He wondered if the snow willow lamented its own form. He usually wouldn't entertain such frivolous thoughts, but the question flitted through his mind anyway. A cherry blossom tree that did not look like its own kind but could not be called a proper willow...what would such a plant think of itself? There was no knowing, of course, but the refined beauty of the snow willow gave off a slight tinge of sadness.

"A cherry blossom tree that mimics a willow yet isn't a willow and is thus neither willow nor cherry blossom. How pitiable." The words spilled out of him unbidden. His heart ached a little, sympathizing with the tree. A tree that looked like a willow but wasn't. A man that looked human but wasn't. The flowers on the branch bloomed so innocently. Their silent, faultless white seemed to shine a light on his own impure heart.

He gazed at the flowers in a daze. He knew the sentimentality he felt was meaningless, but he just couldn't wipe his gloom away.

"But it's pretty, isn't it?" a voice, soft as silk, said. He was slowly dragged from his reverie. In the present moment, he found Ofuu was looking at him. He met her eyes belatedly, and she nodded and smiled. "It's not a willow and looks nothing like a cherry blossom tree, but its flowers are still beautiful. They may scatter every year, but they'll bloom again come spring. I may not know what the snow willow thinks, but I doubt it hates itself. After all, would it bloom every year if it did?" She faced the snow willow as she spoke. Her praise of the tree's flowers resonated with him and eased his gloom some. "There's no need to pity the tree. Regardless of whether it's a cherry blossom tree or a willow, it'll bloom beautifully every spring."

Even if the snow willow didn't know what it was, it continued to bloom and endlessly scatter its petals with the seasons. Knowing full well that the scattering was inevitable, it left proof it existed with its beauty.

"Is that the snow willow's way of life...?" If so, then there really was no need to pity it. Or rather, it'd be wrong to pity it. The snow willow had more fortitude than him; he was not as arrogant as to pity something less pathetic than him.

He nodded to show he understood.

Seeing the change in his mood, Ofuu relaxed and smiled. Cheerfully, she said,

“You’re surprisingly girly.” Certainly, imagining the feelings of a tree was something a young girl might do. Jinya couldn’t refute her claim. She giggled. He felt embarrassed, but there was no malice in her laughter, so he just grinned wryly and took it.

“Let me walk you home,” he said. “Your father’s probably worried sick for you, overprotective as he is.”

“Hehe, you’re probably right.”

After her laughter subsided, the two began walking side by side. The sun had set long ago. The normally bustling streets of Edo and their lines of shops were quiet. A chilly spring breeze blew, but the night was warmer than it had been a few moments ago.

“You know, I think you could stand to relax a little, Jinya-kun,” she said after they had walked a short while.

He looked sidelong at her. She looked awfully mature right now, despite being far younger than him. “Do I appear tense?”

“You do. You seem like you’re forcing yourself along at times.”

The two were by no means close. Her father had suggested they marry, but their actual relationship was nothing more than that of customer and waitress. Despite that, Ofuu somehow correctly saw through to Jinya’s core. Perhaps she was just that sharp. Perhaps he was just that simple. Regardless, he’d been so confident he had grown better at hiding his inner feelings, but apparently not.

“Maybe I am,” he said. He didn’t mind her words. Coming from her, it was something he could stand to hear. “There’s something I must do, and I’m only living to achieve it. So if I look like I’m forcing myself forward, it’s probably because I am.”

Now that he thought about it, gaining power was his sole motivation in life. Hunting demons was nothing more than training for him; he didn’t do it with the intent to protect others at all. He didn’t think that was wrong of him, however. His once-sister would bring ruin to the world of man one day, so it was only right he take responsibility for what he’d caused and stop her. He needed strength to achieve his purpose, and he had no time for anything else.

But Ofuu was right. He was forcing himself, chasing power in hopes it'd be a guidepost to lead him through the darkness. He just wanted to be strong.

"I don't know what it is you're trying to achieve, but it's probably for the best that you take a breather every now and then. It's good to have a goal, but there's more to life than just chasing after it."

"...But it's all I have left." He had lost everything: the woman he loved, his family, even his own self. All he had left was a faint hope that lay in a decision postponed, and the ever-present hatred inside him. So he had to become strong—strong enough to right his mistake. That was all he had to live on for now, and it would be all he had to live for from here on out. "Sorry. But I don't think I'll be able to take up your advice."

He was grateful for her advice, but he had no intention of enjoying his days. He might drink some nice sake and find it delicious, but his hatred would eventually flare up again. A man who couldn't protect anything had no right to find solace in life. He would most likely live as he did now until his pathetic end, unable to change a thing.

"I see..." she said in her usual voice, expressionlessly. She took a few more steps before stopping to crouch at the side of the street. He looked over to see small, four-petaled flowers blooming in ball-like clusters. "Do you know what this flower is called?" she abruptly asked, with a gentle smile.

Jinya knew the name of some edible and medicinal flowers, but very few others. He shook his head.

"It's a winter daphne. It grows buds in autumn, then waits out winter to bloom in spring."

He touched its petals gently with his fingertip. Leaning in, he smelled its strange, bittersweet aroma, which tickled his nose. "It's got a strong smell."

"But it's nice, right? It's called the smell of spring, as it's the flower that signals the start of the season." She stood, then pointed to an inconspicuous dainty flower growing in the shade of a building. He felt a faint nostalgia seeing it. "That one there is chickweed. It's cute, isn't it?"

He hadn't noticed the streetside flower before, but it certainly was

chickweed. He didn't know it grew even here in Edo. "I know that one."

"You do?"

"Yeah. You can boil the stems to use as stomach medicine. I made it a lot back in Kadono...the village I grew up in."

Ofuu expressed surprise. Jinya was six shaku tall and, though slender, clearly well built even through his kimono. He didn't seem frail enough to regularly need stomach medicine.

"A childhood friend of mine drank it a lot," he clarified. "She was a bit sheltered and didn't get to eat sweets much, so she'd gorge herself on them whenever she could and get stomachaches afterwards."

"What a...very interesting person."

"She was. Always ran circles around me too." He closed his eyes, envisioning the far-off scenes of his youth—the happy days when she was still Shirayuki and he was still Jinta. She had a curiosity and youthfulness and would, indeed, always run circles around him. Suzune was there too, the two of them always making some mess for him to clean up. But despite the trouble they gave him, he could smile without a care in the world when he was with them.

Not anymore, though. He couldn't smile like he once could.

"I thought you said you had nothing else left." Ofuu smiled gently, as though trying to dispel his gloom. "You like soba, find flowers beautiful, and have memories you hold dear. You're only temporarily fixated on this goal of yours. So don't say it's all you have left."

He couldn't say a word. Something told him not to cut in. Perhaps it was the grace with which she carried herself. For the slightest of moments, he found himself lost in her smile.

"It'll do you good to stop and appreciate your surroundings every now and then, just like this. You might not realize it, but there are flowers blooming all around you. If only you'd look, you'd see a world you hadn't seen before."

The flowers were just a pretext for her to comfort him, of course. He appreciated her attempt at kindness, but he hated himself for knowing he

would refuse it. The way of life she offered—where one could pause life to search for happiness—was not available to him. Just as he had once chosen duty over his feelings for Shirayuki, he would continue seeking strength in order to stop Suzune, no matter what anyone said.

“Come to think of it, it has been a long time since I stopped to admire the flowers like this.” Even as a demon, though, he could not abandon his human heart. He was not coldhearted enough to strike down her kind gesture. Still as half-baked a man as he once was. He grinned wryly at the thought, causing Ofuu to smile kindly. He said, “Could you teach me the names of some of these other flowers?”

“Gladly.”

The two continued to walk along. A pale moon hung in the spring sky. Ofuu trilled the name of every flower she saw as the two strolled the street under twilight. The sluggish hatred coiling in his heart would not fade, but for tonight he could afford to walk a little slower. All in all, it was a tender night.

“Thank you for walking me home,” Ofuu said, bowing deeply to Jinya before the soba restaurant. The trip felt shorter than expected.

“Not at all. I got something good out of it.”

“I could tell you more about flowers some other time if you’d like?”

“Sure, just maybe while the sun’s still out next time,” he half joked and half admonished, with a smile. Perhaps he had succeeded in relaxing a little. Stopping occasionally to admire the scenery might not be such a bad idea after all.

She frowned and said, “First my father, and now you. Why are all the men around me so overprotective? If a slasher appears, I can run away, at least.”

“Oh, don’t say that. It’s a parent’s job to worry, even if you really could take care of yourself.”

“Then why are you so worried?”

“Why indeed?” He replied somewhat jokingly, but he really didn’t have a

proper answer; he wasn't sure himself. "Well, I should be off then."

"All right. Again, thank you for walking me home," she said with a soft smile.

"Don't worry about it." In a more peaceful mood now, he turned to resume his search for the slasher. There was just a bit more spring to his step than usual.

"What a nice girl," said a sudden voice at his side, causing Jinya to freeze in his tracks.

Jinya looked over and saw Mosuke with a wide grin on his face. "Mosuke...you weren't... Don't tell me you..."

"Well, shall we split up?" he said, sauntering ahead as Jinya struggled to string words together. Mosuke hadn't bothered denying it, meaning he must have indeed heard everything between Jinya and Ofuu from start to finish. By the time he had the wits to complain, Mosuke was already out of sight. Jinya stared out at the streets, just a bit miffed.

After parting with Ofuu, Jinya resumed his search, eventually arriving at Nihonbashi Bridge. He'd fruitlessly wandered the vicinity for a bit, so he now stood on the center of the bridge, leaning against its railing.

Nihonbashi Bridge, the busiest bridge by day, was devoid of activity at night. A red-faced man, likely on his way home from an evening out drinking, was the only other person on the bridge. All was quiet, enough to make out the sound of the water flowing under the bridge. The moon rippled on its surface, and a gentle breeze blew. A pleasant night, only ruined by the lack of results, Jinya thought with a sigh.

A young girl in a madder-red kimono came along then, despite the late hour. She looked to be around Ofuu's age. This was no time for a girl to be out alone. He watched her pass by out of the corner of his eye, when the girl suddenly met his gaze.

"Oh..." Her eyes widened when they met his.

What was she so surprised by, he wondered. He looked right at her and

frowned. Something was familiar about her. She had fair looks, but most striking was her willful gaze that he swore he'd seen somewhere else before. He racked his brain, trying to remember, when suddenly the wind gusted.

"Ah...agh?" A spray of blood shot forth from the red-faced man, and he collapsed onto the ground. He looked like he'd been mauled by a claw. His death was swift, not even allowing him time to suffer.

"Huh...?" The girl's eyes shot open wide, unable to process what just happened. A moment passed, then another, before finally she let out a scream. "E-eeeeek!"

Jinya put a hand on his sword as the girl's scream echoed. His mind went cold and his senses sharp.

The wind rushed again, but this time he reacted swiftly. He'd felt the dense malice of his assailant approaching, preceding the sound. He pushed off his left foot, turning to face the roaring wind as quick as he could, and drew his blade.

"Ngh...!"

But his enemy was faster. Before Jinya could completely draw his blade, their attack hit him. Thankfully, his half-drawn sword was able to shield him. After blocking with the blade, he retreated and fully drew his sword. He hoped to counterattack, but his enemy was already out of range.

"Huh? Wh-what's going on? What was that?!"

The girl seemed confused, but Jinya had no time to pay her any mind. Without letting his guard drop, he coldly said, "Don't move too much. If you want to stay alive, that is."

"F-fine." She still sounded flustered, but she had calmed down some. If she flailed around, it would only cause him more trouble.

He put some distance between himself and the girl. He couldn't turn into a demon with a human watching. So instead, he raised his sword to shoulder height in a two-handed grip and waited for the next attack.

He heard the wind tear as something approached fast. He spun in the direction of the noise and swung his blade down diagonally—but his strike

came up short. He changed his sword's course and moved to block. His assailant approached again, and this time he saw the gleam of claws. He blocked, parrying with his sword guard and taking a half step back, then swinging upwards in a counter-strike. But he didn't feel much resistance against his blade. He cut skin but only dealt a scratch.

He had patiently predicted and countered the attacks...but all his strikes came short. He frowned. His opponent was fast, inhumanly so. Too fast for him to even see them, but he was certain they had to be a demon. That much was clear from its movements.

The demon landed about four ken³ away. Jinya sized it up as it snarled. It had four limbs like a human but stood on all of them like a beast. Its skin was swarthy, and it looked like an amalgamation of a human and a dog. Its murky red eyes glared vacantly at Jinya. It seemed to have no intention of abducting the girl, focusing the entirety of its heavy malice on him.

"It seems you're the real deal," Jinya said. It was known that the slasher killed men with its claws and never killed women, both in line with what this demon was doing. Jinya had his quarry now for sure.

"What is your—" He began to ask for the demon's name but never got to finish the question. The demon came at him.

Jinya swung down on its head, but the demon dodged while maintaining its speed. He switched to a backhand grip and stepped towards the demon, then swung his body as he followed the demon with his blade. He was sure he had it. The demon shouldn't be able to reposition itself in the air, after all. But it overturned his expectations and *kicked off the empty air*, barreling forth again. The movement defied all reason, its speed leaving him no time to even be surprised.

"Eek!"

Its target was the girl.

It tricked him. The demon's attacks were all a distraction. The slasher was known to kill men and *abduct* women. It had been after the girl from the start.

It was too late for regret now. Jinya couldn't stop the demon in time. The

demon reached for the girl—but only found air. The girl had, for some reason, fallen to the side as though pushed by somebody, although nobody was nearby.

“Mosuke...!” Jinya realized quickly that Mosuke must have arrived at some point. Jinya smiled in relief but quickly refocused. He stooped and lunged forth.

“Uuhn...”

The demon didn’t move, perhaps confused by what just transpired. That was fine by Jinya. It was a shame he couldn’t ask its name, but he would cut it down regardless.

He held his sword horizontally as he ran, then kicked off the ground with his left foot and closed the distance in a burst. He unleashed a slash full of killing intent, tracing a straight, horizontal line—through empty air.

“**Graaaaaaaah!**” The demon had already slipped outside his strike range. Perhaps understanding it was at a disadvantage, it turned and fled while letting out a roar. Given its speed, following it would be impossible.

Jinya saw it leave and gritted his teeth. “There’s no chasing that...” His face didn’t show it, but he was mortified. He’d fought many demons since coming to Edo, but this was the first time in a long while that he’d been so outclassed.

He let out a sigh, cooling his heated body. Letting the demon escape stung, but there was no sense in kicking himself over it. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with chilly night air and calming down.

“*Jinya-san,*” he heard someone whisper. It was Mosuke, still invisible as he didn’t want to appear in his demon form before the girl.

Jinya whispered back so the girl wouldn’t hear. “Sorry, I let it get away.”

“*It’s fine. There was no way of knowing it’d be that strong.*” Mosuke himself was far too weak to fight the demon. He let out a bitter groan of understanding. “*I’ll head off in the direction it went for now. Who knows, maybe I can find where it lives.*”

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“*I know. I can’t say I’ll even be able to find it, but I’ll come back for you if I do. I’m not foolish enough to seek suicide. You go on ahead and take care of that*

girl."

"Will do."

The air stirred. Mosuke must have left.

Jinya looked off in the direction where the demon had fled. There was no chance Mosuke could kill it, but with his demon power he might be able to find where it lived and come back safely. The question was whether he could keep his cool in front of his wife's killer. Jinya wanted to trust Mosuke wouldn't be so foolish, but the possibility nagged at him. Perhaps he'd better chase after the demon too.

"...Hey." The girl, sounding a bit grumpy, interrupted his thoughts. He looked over and saw she was staring at him while sitting on the ground.

"Yes?"

"...I can't..." She whispered something too faint for him to hear. He cocked his head, at which she blushed and stammered, "I said I can't get up! So lend me a hand already, will you?!"

Expressionlessly, he extended a hand to her. She took it and unsteadily rose to her feet. She appeared unharmed, just weak in the legs from fear.

"Thanks."

"Don't worry about it."

"Hmm... You're still as curt as ever, huh?"

A bit nonplussed, he examined her again. She really did look somewhat familiar...

"Don't tell me you've forgotten about me?" she said with suspicion, sharpening her gaze. The anxiety in her eyes reminding him of a job from many years ago.

"...Natsu-dono?"

Natsu—the girl from Sugaya, Jyuuzou's daughter. Her appearance hadn't changed much over the years.

Her face lit up. It seemed he guessed right. "So you *do* remember after all."

“Sorry, it took me a minute. You were a lot younger when we last met, after all.” She was thirteen at their last meeting. Three years had passed, and now she was a little taller and her figure slightly fuller.

“I guess I can’t fault you for not recognizing me right away,” she said. “I see you haven’t changed a bit though.”

Of course he hadn’t. His body wouldn’t age, come three years or a hundred. He was completely unfazed at having his agelessness pointed out now. Whether that was because he’d matured or because he was no longer human, he did not know.

“I’m the type that doesn’t show age much,” he said.

“Are you trying to make an enemy of women the world over?” she said with some exasperation. She tottered a bit, still lacking strength in her legs. He moved closer to support her. She blushed again and quietly muttered, “Thanks.”

“Do you always walk alone at night?” he asked.

“Of course not. I was out running an errand. I went to deliver something to a long-time patron, but things ran a little late.”

“Helping your father out?”

“Yep. It’s what I owe to my parent.”

He remembered her as this cheeky young girl, but she seemed like a completely different person now, as she smiled without a care in the world.

“You’ve changed,” he said.

“Have I?”

“Yeah. You smile more naturally now.”

She could barely say “thank you” before, but now she said it with ease. It was a relatively trivial thing, but perhaps there was more to growth than physical changes.

“W-well, I couldn’t remain a child forever,” she said.

“No, no, you’re still a child, Miss Natsu.”

“*Eek!*” Surprised by the sudden third voice, Natsu jumped. At least the way she froze up when scared hadn’t changed.

“You were running late, so I figured I’d come fetch you.”

“Z-Zenji? Don’t scare me like that!”

“I didn’t do anything in particular though? Wait, hey... Aren’t you Jinya?” Zenji’s eyes widened as he belatedly recognized Jinya. He beamed happily at their reunion.

“It’s been a while, Zenji-dono.”

“Yeah, it really has! What brings you here?”

“He saved me right when I was being attacked by a demon,” Natsu said, her head turned away.

Zenji grabbed her shoulders and, with a deeply serious look, said, “Oh no, is that demon back? Your father really loves you, Miss Natsu! I swear it, please believe—”

“Cut it out! It’s a different demon! C’mon, tell him, Jinya!”

It appeared Zenji thought Natsu’s demon had returned. A little astounded by the mix-up, Jinya began to explain what had really happened. “Have you heard about the recent rumors of a slasher?”

“Huh? Well, yeah, a bit,” Zenji answered.

“The slasher is a demon, and I am currently pursuing that demon. Natsu-dono being attacked was a coincidence.”

Zenji let out a big sigh of relief. “Oh, I get it now. Phew. Man, you always get caught up in the craziest things, Miss Natsu.”

“...Hmph. So you’ll believe Jinya without question, but not me?” Natsu said with a pout.

“Huh? O-oh, are you still hung up on that?”

“Am I not allowed to be?”

“I-I didn’t say that...”

It seemed Natsu still hadn't forgotten about how Zenji didn't believe her when she said a demon was after her three years ago. Zenji got flustered as he tried to get back on her good side. It seemed their dynamic hadn't changed much.

Jinya's shoulders relaxed as he watched the two have their little back and forth, then he remembered Mosuke and the demon. "Since you're here to walk her back, Zenji, I'll be going," he said. Mosuke should've returned to him by now. Jinya feared the worst.

"Oh. Well, thanks for this. Actually, what're you even up to these days, anyway?" Natsu asked.

"The same. Just living the carefree ronin life. I frequent a soba place in Fukagawa called Kihee, though. Come find me if you have any demon troubles. I'll give you a discount."

"So you'll still charge us..."

"Of course. I got to make a living somehow." He grinned mildly, then turned and left.

He didn't get far before he heard Zenji call after him. "Oh, hold on, Jinya."

He stopped and looked over his shoulder. Zenji had a serious look in his eye. "Have you heard of Yanaka temple town?"

Jinya nodded. A temple town was a town located on the outskirts of Edo, built around a temple or temple complex. There were many stories of ghosts and spirits appearing in such places.

Zenji continued, "There's a temple there called Mizuho Temple. Its chief priest passed away a long time ago and it's since been abandoned, but I heard from our customers that the voices of women can be heard there every night."

The slasher only abducted women. Perhaps this was a lead?

"...And according to the rumors, a demon lives there."

It all lined up. The slasher needed someplace to...take care of its abducted women, and nobody would enter an abandoned temple, especially if they heard eerie voices coming from it.

Jinya had no way to know if he'd find the slasher there, but he would probably find *something*, even if it was another demon. It just so happened that the direction the slasher escaped in matched the direction of the temple as well.

"Is this rumor of any use to you?" Zenji asked.

"It is. Thank you."

"Anytime."

This might prove to be the lucky break he needed. With a lead finally in hand, Jinya set off.

After running and running, then running some more, Mosuke finally came across a temple town on the outskirts of Edo.

I think I came the right way...

This was Yanaka temple town, and true to its name, it contained a large swathe of temples. The darkness of night made it look eerie; it was easy to see why there were so many frightful rumors about the place.

The area was light on foot traffic, however. It was not an ideal place for the slasher to seek out victims. Mosuke began thinking he had gone the wrong way when—

Aaaaaah!

—he heard a scream echo through the night.

That was close by, he thought as he blended into his surroundings. He silenced his footsteps and made towards the direction of the scream. He tried to resist the urge to run. A strong gust of wind blew loudly.

No. That wasn't a gust of wind but a demon running along with a woman in hand.

Mosuke saw the demon, a mixture of a human and a dog, as it ran past holding a limp young woman. It was the same demon he saw earlier, no doubt. Its claws were wet with blood. It had killed again as it fled and had abducted

another woman.

That's the demon that killed my wife...

Mosuke felt a shiver run down his spine. He glared in the direction the demon had gone and saw a dilapidated shrine at the end of a narrow alley, one that had been abandoned some time ago when its chief priest died. Its name —“Mizuho Temple...”

He'd finally found it—the place his hatred would reach its end.

4

THERE ARE MANY WAYS a demon can be born.

Sometimes one is born as a result of a demon defiling a human for pleasure. Sometimes one is born when a human falls corrupt to dark emotions like hatred, jealousy, or despair. Sometimes one is born from nothingness, from mere thoughts drawn together and coalescing into something. There are many ways a demon can be born, but the end results are all called “demons” regardless. Mosuke was a pure-demon, born from a demon mother and father.

He had no memories of ever living with his parents. While demons respected their own kind, they were also often individualists. Most demons considered their own needs more important than assuming the role of parent. If a demon had a child but considered it a hindrance to their way of life, they would abandon it without a second thought. That was simply what it meant to be a demon. Mosuke's parents did the same, abandoning him without even naming him.

He didn't mind. He understood that was just the nature of demons. He felt no ill will towards his parents, but he did decide that their way of life wasn't for him and instead chose to live among humans. Humans were prone to treachery the moment things turned south, but they were easier to live with than demons, who lived bound by their own will. He desired a life of no grand pleasures but one full of small joys instead. He only wanted to live peacefully, and then one day die peacefully. Nothing more.

So, he took on a human form and named himself Mosuke. He found residence in a back-alley row house as an ordinary townspeople and enjoyed a life of leisure, albeit in some poverty. He found the social interactions that naturally developed from settling in one place annoying but not unbearable, as long as no one suspected he was a demon.

Occasionally, he'd meet this young woman. She lived in the same row house as him, always wore a carefree smile, and had a happy family waiting at home for her. She took interest in the simple, mellow Mosuke and was friendly and caring to him. Mosuke found himself charmed by her purehearted nature. The two quickly grew closer, and by the time the second spring rolled around, they were lovers.

The whole row house gave the pair their blessings, but Mosuke felt guilty about their relationship. He lived as a human now, but his true identity was that of a demon. The happy moments they shared were full of lies, and that fact tormented him for a long time.

One day, he decided to tell her what he truly was. He wanted to make her his wife, and for that reason, he could no longer deceive her. After hiding his identity throughout his life, he mustered up courage for the first time ever. Before proposing, he told her his true identity.

He was prepared for her to reject him and wouldn't begrudge her for it; man and demon were simply not meant to be together, after all. But her response surprised him.

"Is that all?"

It took him so much courage to open up, yet she accepted him, just like that. He thought there would be something more—a serious discussion, perhaps—but her simple, offhand reply made everything feel so unreal.

He said so, and she laughed, saying, "I fell in love with you not because you were a demon or a human, but because you're you."

He was reminded of her pureheartedness and felt silly for having been worried at all. She smiled as well, agreeing he was silly.

And so, the two became husband and wife.

Life didn't change much for Mosuke. He spent his days in quiet peace like he always did, but now with his wife by his side. The days he'd enjoyed all these years were just a little more mellow now. Life held no grand pleasures, but it did have many small joys. His uneventful, peaceful days would go on.

Or they should have, at least.

The grounds of Mizuho Temple were in a state of neglect. Weeds grew rampant, and not a trace of its former sanctity remained. The spring night air had a chill to it. A breeze rustled the weeds. Such a lonely sound. The lack of any noise but the rustling highlighted the desolation of the place even more.

The sound of sand crunching underfoot broke the stillness. Mosuke had followed the demon to the temple grounds. He no longer took the form of a weak-looking townsman but a murky, black-skinned demon with a grotesque right eye. He was already using his power to erase his presence and was trying his hardest to silence his footsteps as he proceeded into the main building.

Clutched in his hands was a dagger he had newly bought. Jinya had broken his last weapon, so he'd shelled out extra to buy something sturdier that wouldn't break so easily. It was forged in a village known as Kadono, a place said to make weapons capable of rending even demons. Whether that claim was true or not would soon be made clear.

As he approached the main building, he faintly heard the voice of a woman. His heart rate remained steady. He wasn't here to do good, after all. He barely cared about another civilian dying. All that mattered was that he kill that demon here and now. Everything else fell to the wayside. Even his promise to return to Jinya vanished as the prospect of revenge neared.

Mosuke stepped onto the wooden floor of the temple structure without bothering to take off his footwear. No matter how hard he tried to silence his footsteps, the floorboards creaked beneath him, but he couldn't stop when his revenge was so close.

The demon resembled a beast, its body a strange cross between man and dog. Its arms and legs were more human than animal, perhaps to allow it bipedal movement. It stood in darkness which, coupled with its swarthy skin,

made it seem like it was a shadow that had risen off the ground.

Crunch...shhhlip...

A revolting wet sound could be heard. It wasn't until Mosuke saw the red-eyed beast holding the headless corpse of a voluptuous woman in its clutches that he recognized it as the sound of swallowing.

Blood ran from her torn flesh. The demon took another bite, consuming her entire upper torso. An arm fell to the floor, ripped from the shoulder. Intent on leaving nothing behind, the demon picked the arm up and swallowed it, bone and all.

But none of that matters.

How long had Mosuke spent in search of this demon? Perhaps an eternity. Perhaps a mere moment. Regardless, it was here before him now.

The demon continued to devour the woman.

It doesn't matter.

He readied his dagger and approached.

"I have to...return..." the demon muttered.

That doesn't matter.

It seemed both hurried and unwilling as it devoured the woman, spattering blood and viscera everywhere. Almost like a child begrudgingly eating their vegetables after a scolding from a parent.

None of it matters.

You...you killed my wife.

Mosuke's eyes clouded with anger. He didn't care why the demon had killed so many, nor why the demon had devoured so many. None of it mattered to him. All that mattered in this moment was that this demon had robbed him of his beloved.

He was at his limit. Driven by his hatred and still invisible, he bolted towards the demon.

It was still eating. He would pierce its skull from behind, crack it open, and turn the contents into mush. He held his dagger in a reverse grip and raised it.

He was just one step away when the demon spun around. In his hatred, Mosuke had forgotten, that his power only erased his form, not the sound he made. He had run so wildly. Of course he'd been heard.

He froze, feeling the blood drain from his face, as the demon's copper-red eyes looked through him.

Calm down, he told himself. *It doesn't suspect a thing, only heard some sound. I can move and attack again.* His mind cooled, and he rationally thought out his next move.

The demon didn't move. That was proof that it didn't know he was there. Planning to ambush him from behind, he slowly took a step.

The floor creaked, and the demon blurred.

"Gah...?!"

The demon vanished, and in the same instant, half of Mosuke's torso was gouged out. Many of his organs were gone, including his heart. He dropped to his knees, then tumbled the rest of the way onto the floor.

The taste of iron spread in his mouth. It hurt so much he couldn't help but laugh, and yet the pain was also somehow faint. His vision clouded as though a mist were enveloping his gaze.

There was no avoiding death. He understood this from the blood loss and the creeping chill.

From Mosuke's perspective, the demon seemed to have vanished, but in truth it had only dashed forward in a straight line while swiping a claw. The movement was simply too fast for Mosuke to follow. The demon didn't even know Mosuke was there, at least not exactly. It simply attacked in the direction it heard a sound and happened to hit something.

Without the strength to maintain his invisibility, Mosuke's grotesque demon body became fully visible, bleeding out on the floor. A white vapor rose from him. He would disappear soon. No, the demon would kill him sooner.

He would die without avenging his wife. That filled him with a regret greater than his fear of death. Things might have ended differently if he had been calmer. But it was too late. He would be mercilessly killed any moment now.

He gritted his teeth bitterly, but seconds went by, and the demon didn't deliver the finishing blow. He raised his head, confused, and saw the demon had returned to eating.

Crunch...crunch...

It stuffed its cheeks with entrails, then swallowed the legs whole. After consuming the woman's corpse without leaving a single scrap, it strolled past Mosuke and left, satisfied. Mosuke could do nothing but watch it go.

Perhaps it saw no merit in killing a soon-to-be-dead man. Or perhaps it saw no merit in killing Mosuke at all.

"Ha ha... Damn it..." He laughed, weakly.

Indeed, this was the place his hatred would reach its end. An end he would share, and nothing more.

"...This must be it."

Belatedly, Jinya arrived at Mizuho Temple. The place was in shambles and only lit by faint moonlight. Everything was as still as death. The silence should've been calming, but it only felt eerie. He focused his senses and slowly walked further inward. He figured if the slasher were here, it'd likely be in the main temple building.

He stepped onto the wooden floor without taking his footwear off and heard a creak characteristic of old buildings. A thin layer of dust, piled up from ages of neglect, coated the boards. On it, he saw footprints. Somebody was making regular use of the place.

He popped his blade from its scabbard, readying it to be drawn, and focused on his surroundings to react to any incoming attacks. He advanced forward at a snail's pace. Moving farther back into the main temple, he felt heavy, moist air cling to his skin.

The smell here was an old, familiar one. It was the smell of corpses, resembling a mixture of iron and sulfur. He looked around and saw splatters of fat and blood all over—it made his stomach turn. He also saw a grotesque demon lying limply on the floor—Mosuke.

Mosuke was back in his demon form and the left half of his body had been gouged away. He twitched slightly, and a white vapor rose from him, but he still remained dimly conscious.

Jinya didn't run over. After all, the slasher could be waiting for the moment he bent over Mosuke. Instead, Jinya approached step by step, ready to draw his blade at any instant.

But he reached Mosuke without anything happening. It wasn't a trap. He didn't show it outwardly, but he felt awful inside. Once, he would've run over and helped Mosuke up without a second thought, but he couldn't anymore. Now he was suspicious of everything, to the point of hesitating even when someone was bleeding out. Jinya lamented at how jaded he had become.

"Mosuke," he called in a whisper.

With some labored breaths, Mosuke managed to roll over and look up at Jinya with empty eyes. **"Hey. Sorry you had to see me like this."** He smiled, but he was clearly in great pain. He had only thought of avenging his wife—no, only *lived* to avenge his wife. And yet he failed and was soon to be dead by the slasher's hand as well. Only a fool would think they could understand the depths of his anguish.

"Was it the slasher?"

"Yeah. I caught it eating a woman. That...that bastard...killed my wife..." It took all he had to speak. Bitterness in his eyes, he glared up at nothingness.

His words rubbed Jinya as odd, however. The slasher was...eating. That part stuck in his mind like a lump in the throat that wouldn't clear.

"I'm sorry, Jinya-san, but could you please grant me one last request?" Mosuke's voice grew firm again as he regathered his scattered consciousness.

Jinya halted his train of thought. Now was not the time to think but to listen. "What is it?"

The white vapor continued to rise from Mosuke. His death was nearing, and his voice was weakening. Jinya crouched and leaned in close to Mosuke's face, not wanting to miss a single word from the man who lived for revenge.

What came was a tearful plea full of regret and grief. **"Please...please...! Avenge her for me...!"** He extended the dagger in his hand.

Jinya himself was also someone who entrusted his entire being to hatred. Foolish as it was, he thought he could understand the depths of the anguish Mosuke felt over failing to carry out his revenge. The two had only known each other for a short time, but they had gotten along well. Perhaps, Jinya hoped, they could even be considered friends. It was the least he could do to grant his final request.

Jinya placed his left hand on Mosuke's body and said, "All right. But in exchange, I want you to lend me your strength."

He thought Mosuke would question his strange request. After all, how could a dying man possibly help in a fight? But after a brief pause, and without the slightest hint of hesitation, Mosuke said, **"But of course. Take whatever will be of use to you, my friend."**

Jinya nodded solemnly. He firmly gripped the dagger in his right hand and, without expression or emotion, said, "Your request has been heard."

5

IT STARTED WITH a pool of blood and the corpses of many men. By the time my mind cleared, I was already a demon. I've been constantly searching ever since.

Searching for who? Who? I don't know. But I've always been searching.

I found a man as I searched, so I killed him. I had to. Men must be killed because they're men. That's why I kill them whenever I see them. I don't know why I do, but there's also no reason not to, so I do. It feels refreshing too, so it must be the right thing to do.

Men should all die. Yes. I must've been born as a demon to kill them, surely.

I killed another man yesterday, but it didn't feel refreshing. It made me feel restless inside, and irritated too. I wanted to feel refreshed, so I went out again and searched.

Searched for who? Who? I don't know, but I've always been searching.

I have to hurry up and return.

Return? Return to where? I don't know.

But I know one thing: I can't return like this. So I brought another woman back tonight, to eat. They don't taste good. But I need to eat women. This demon body lacks the right parts.

I need to gather lots and lots to eat so I can hurry up and return.

I took another woman and brought her to the old temple. I dropped her in the wide room. She's a prostitute, I think. Her kimono is flashy. I think her name was Yuunagi.

Yuunagi? Her name doesn't matter. I need to eat. Eat lots and return.

Return to where? I don't know. I just want to return. I need to kill more men and eat more women to return. And be faster. I need to move faster and be faster to return as quickly as I can.

I need to hurry up and finish eating this woman so I can return too...

"I had a feeling you'd come back here even after being spotted here before. Your mind's just as dull as your animal form implies." A voice, cold and stiff like lead, interrupted my meal.

I turned to look, eyes wide with surprise, but no one was there.

My imagination? No. I heard the voice. Someone was here.

Sssshwt.

There was a sound. My arm was cut before I knew it.

"Ahh..."

It fell to the ground suddenly.

What was that? I don't understand. It hurts. What is happening?

I looked around. There was nobody here. And then suddenly there was.

My heart leapt with joy. I don't know why, but it was probably because the man I had failed to kill before was now here. Another chance to kill him had come. Exhilarated, I glared at him.

Before me stood a demon holding a sword.

Before Jinya stood a demon devouring a woman.

Cool-headed, he sharpened his gaze upon it. The air in the dilapidated temple teemed with dust and the smell of iron. The demon was in the middle of its meal, so he surprised it by cutting off an arm. It didn't seem to feel pain, though. It appeared relatively unfazed as it turned around and identified him as its assailant.

“Ahhhhh...”

The demon dropped to the floor, then sprung forth. It kicked off the walls, the ceiling, the floor again, and the empty air itself, swinging its claws and maneuvering as it pleased at a speed that defied logic. It was unreasonably fast. If this were a race, Jinya would be left in its dust.

“You're fast, and can even use the air as a footing... How annoying.”

But this wasn't a race, it was a deathmatch. Despite the demon's great speed, it couldn't land a single blow on Jinya. It could only dive in the wrong places, swing at nothing, then kick off again and repeat the process with reckless abandon, but no payoff.

“But you're fighting two this time.”

It heard the voice and attacked again, this time coming closer. Still, the attack went wide, hitting only air.

But perhaps that was to be expected, for the demon couldn't see a trace of Jinya at all. He was aided by Mosuke's power, hidden.

“Aaa, aaahhh...!” The demon stopped and groaned of irritation, or perhaps confusion. Jinya took the opportunity to undo his invisibility and appear directly before it.

His left arm was fiercely swollen, and he had red eyes, proof he was inhuman. It was his usual demonic appearance, but there was a slight difference now. The right side of his face was malformed, as though covered by a black metal mask, and his right eye was conspicuously red all the way to the sclera—just like Mosuke’s when he was a demon.

“**You too...eat...?**” the woman-devouring demon asked with palpable malice, as it kicked off again. Its eyes held bottomless hatred and murderous intent—but its attacks still couldn’t connect. The moment it stopped to turn towards its target, he was gone. Speed was meaningless against an opponent one couldn’t see. It attacked anyway, overshooting, and lost a leg the moment it landed.

“**Aa, aaah...?!**” It showed distress for the first time. It tried to kick away but instead fell forward and then noticed the leg rolling on the ground. Its expression was tinged more with grief than pain, twisting in confusion at the loss of its leg.

“*Invisibility*—that’s the name of the power you’ve lost to. If he weren’t bound by his hatred, I’m sure even Mosuke’s blade would have reached you.” He brought Yarai down without any emotion in his swing. The demon did not resist. It barely moved, as though it found its life worthless next to the leg it had just lost.

“**Aaah.**” It shrieked feebly, like a young girl, before Jinya slashed diagonally through it. The gray sword cut into its body, and the demon fell back without any fanfare, like its early frenzy had been but a lie.

The dilapidated temple turned quiet again. Jinya looked down at the demon and undid his *Invisibility*. He looked just like a demon every bit as hideous as the slasher and thus felt no joy in his victory. In the first place, he only earned it because he had the strength of two, and only a fool would boast about winning an unfair fight.

Jinya had fought many demons before, both as a human and as a demon, but this demon’s speed had proved particularly problematic. But he had the ability to erase his presence now, and the demon had nothing going for it outside of speed. It lacked combat experience and was utterly helpless when unable to

find its target. The outcome of their fight was only natural.

Their struggle had kicked up clouds of dust and left cracks in the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling, leaving the temple in an even more miserable state than it already had been. Jinya swung the blood off Yarai and returned it to its scabbard. Looking down at the demon, from whom a white vapor was beginning to rise, he said, "I don't know if you can understand my words, but I'd like to ask you something."

Gasping for air, the demon pushed itself upright. Its red eyes looked at Jinya. They stared with neither hate nor focus. It didn't seem keen to continue fighting.

Jinya began, "When I first heard the rumors of slashings, I was told the body count didn't add up."

Those murdered in the slashings were left in a cruel, torn-up state. However, there were always fewer bodies than the number gone missing, which meant some were being abducted or spirited away. That was why rumors about the slasher being a demon began.

"But Mosuke said his wife's body was found..."

Given the rumors, the fact that a body was found was strange. If people were abducted but later found dead, then the body counts would line up. The stories Jinya had heard from the Kihee restaurant owner and Mosuke contradicted one another, but it was hard to believe either had lied. The restaurant owner had nothing to gain from lying, and Mosuke, a demon, couldn't lie. So what happened?

"Mosuke also said you ate a woman here, which means there's no doubt you're the cause of all the disappearances, but it still doesn't add up..."

The demon ate the women it abducted, which meant no corpses were left behind. But that didn't line up with the fact Mosuke's wife was discovered dead with signs of sexual assault. Supposing all Jinya heard was true, then there was only one possibility that undid the contradiction.

"You are the rumored slasher, but you're not the one who killed Mosuke's wife. Tell me then, just what are you?"

Mosuke's wife was abducted a month ago and found dead ten days later, but the rumors of the slasher only started very recently. Furthermore, the rumors used to be of a slasher that killed men and sexually assaulted women, but they were soon replaced with rumors of a slasher that killed men and ate women. Where did that first slasher disappear to, and where had this demon come from?

Jinya waited for the demon to answer. A silence stretched for what felt like an eternity.

"Body..." the demon weakly murmured. **"I need...a body..."** The words were nonsensical, perhaps because the demon lacked the intellect for anything more. It said nothing more, and silence fell again.

Jinya reasoned that further probing would be just as fruitless but decided he ask one more question, just in case. "Before you go, tell me your name."

"Ha...tsu..." the demon feebly answered.

"Hatsu..." He hadn't expected the demon to answer. All the same, he committed the name to heart and swore to carry its weight with him, as was his responsibility for taking the demon's life.

He grabbed the demon by the neck and brought it to his eye level.

"Ah..."

Its eyes stared into Jinya's blankly, bearing neither hatred nor fear. That made it hard. What he was about to do was something far more sinister than some mere slashings. It'd be easier if it hated him.

"Earlier you asked me if I eat others as well." Jinya's expression remained flat. He wasn't without feeling, but he didn't dare show what he felt. This was his own choice. To show his anguish outwardly would be seeking pity to excuse his terrible actions. "You guessed right. Just as you devoured all those women, I devour demons."

The truth was, he had realized not too long ago that this demon shouldn't have been the target of Mosuke's revenge. But this precise moment was the reason he killed it anyway.

“Gah...?!”

His left arm pulsed like a heart. The demon, fading into white vapor, groaned in pain from something other than the cuts on its body.

“I’ll be devouring your power now.”

“Agh...ah...” The demon understood it was being consumed, but it had no way to resist.

“Dart...” An ability that lets you increase your speed for a brief moment. You can even use it to kick off empty air the moment you activate it. Seems useful.”

The demon’s knowledge flowed into Jinya. His unsightly left arm held the power of *Assimilation*, allowing him to absorb other living beings. For the duration he was connected with his target, he was able to access their memories and knowledge. What little the demon remembered flowed through his arm and into his mind.

This demon was only born a short while ago. Most demons only gained their unique power after a hundred years, but this one was one of the rare few that was born with theirs.

Even more memories flowed into him, and he finally learned of the demon’s identity. First he felt a dizzying sense of fear. Two men attacked a woman, tore her clothes, and covered her mouth. Helpless, she was violated. She felt their hands against her skin, the pain of being penetrated, and heard the laughter of the men as she was rendered less than human or woman, but a mere tool for the satisfaction of their lust. At the end, she was killed and thrown into the river.

There, her memories ended. That is, her memories as a human ended. He felt a hollowing despair and rising hatred as the woman’s body faded, leaving only her emotions to become a demon.

“So that’s what you are...”

The demon was a woman raped and killed by two men—or rather, it was that woman’s lasting grudge, her despair and hatred given shape.

That was why the demon killed men. She’d lost herself in her hatred, saw all

men as the same as those who'd assaulted and killed her, and would search for and kill more men every night.

"I have to keep searching..."

She ate women, perhaps out of an instinct to return to what she once was. She must've wanted to revert into being human before she was killed for being a demon. But only her emotions had become a demon, so she lacked a human body. She thought she could make a new one. She abducted young women and took their flesh by consuming them. She ate, ate, and ate some more, blindly believing she could regain a body this way.

"I have to return..."

All for the sake of returning to what she once was. She didn't know where or what she wanted to return to, but she understood regardless that she wanted to return, and to achieve that goal she killed and abducted, killed and abducted, over and over.

"You just wanted things to go back to the way they were, huh?"

The demon only wanted back the happiness she once had.

"Even though that's impossible..."

What's lost is lost. No matter how hard you prayed for something forever gone, it could not return. Such was a simple fact of the world, but the demon sought her former happiness regardless. What a sad thing that was, and enviable too. Perhaps she would've been happier to simply fade away and be at peace. An emotion stirred within Jinya, but he didn't know if it was pity or envy.

"...Why?"

He came back to his senses and saw the demon's red eyes were questioning him. **"You...why? Eat demon...then what? What for...?"**

The question wasn't sarcasm but genuine. She ate to return to being human. What could he be consuming demons for? Perhaps, to her, Jinya appeared an incomprehensible monster.

"Aah...aaaah..." A tinge of sadness showed in her eyes. But it didn't last long. Her consciousness turned thin soon after. With an anguished grimace, she

deliriously murmured, **“Faster...I need to search faster...return...”**

To his side.

The demon faded to nothingness, leaving behind only an unrealized wish.

Jinya was alone in the temple now.

He gazed at his right hand. The skin had turned a dark indigo, like black rust. Chances were, the same was true for the rest of his body as well. It came of absorbing the demon. He was one irreversible step further along now.

The utter silence made the temple feel bleak. It reminded him of another time, causing an old memory to surface.

“Human, for what purpose do you wield your blade?”

Even now, after all these years of killing, he still hadn’t found an answer to that question. Hatred still dwelled inside him, but he still also wanted to forgive Suzune.

As a human, he wanted to stop her, so he would need the strength to do so at the very least. For that reason, he could trample over the wishes of others and edge his body even closer to that of a demon’s.

“Really, what *am* I doing all this for?” he muttered with a self-deprecating smile.

Shirayuki... If I keep doing this, will I really find my answer one day?

There was no one to answer his question.

Before he realized it, he had become alone.

Some days later, Jinya visited the back-alley row house Mosuke lived in. In his right hand was another bottle of Kamigata-imported sake. There was no particular significance to him bringing the bottle, it just felt right to.

He slid the door of the single-room flat open and found the cramped space just as it had been, so much so that it felt like Mosuke would appear any moment to say, “Oh, hello. Come on in,” with a toothy smile.

“Oh, hello. Are you an acquaintance of Mosuke-san’s?”

Startled, Jinya turned around, thinking for a moment that Mosuke had actually appeared. Instead, there stood a woman who didn’t resemble Mosuke in the least. She looked in her mid-thirties and was a bit stout, giving the impression of a strong mother.

“Ah, yes, I am,” Jinya answered.

“Well, he’s been gone for a few days now. Do you have any idea where he might be?”

He cast his gaze downwards, unable to bring himself to speak the truth. The woman took that as an “I don’t know” and sighed. She said, “I see... He’s been rather down since Hatsu-san passed away. I can only hope he hasn’t done anything drastic.”

“...Hatsu-san?”

“Hm? Oh, did you not know her name? Hatsu-san was Mosuke-san’s wife. The two were quite well known in the area for being lovebirds.”

Come to think of it, Jinya never did learn the name of Mosuke’s wife. Hatsu... The name rang a bell, and he wished he could have ignored it, but this was not a truth he could avoid. The demon he killed had the same name. A coincidence?

The woman continued, “Absolutely smitten with Mosuke, she was. Always excused herself from our chatter saying she had to hurry up and return to her husband. She didn’t deserve what happened to her... Oh. I’m sorry, you don’t want to hear this.”

“It’s fine.”

She didn’t deserve what? he thought, but knew better than to ask. It was clear enough. The name was no coincidence.

He recalled the demon’s words. It kept muttering ad nauseam about *searching* and *returning*. He had thought she was searching for the men that had killed her, but perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps what she was searching for, and what she wanted to return to were one and the same. Perhaps who she was searching for was...

...What did it matter now? Whatever the truth was, knowing it wouldn't change a thing. What's lost is lost. Some things could not be undone, no matter how desperately one reached for the past.

"What do you have there?" the woman asked, pointing at the bottle in his hand.

"Sake. I wanted to share it with Mosuke, but it seems I won't get the chance," he answered. That really was the reason why he'd come back. He was fonder of their friendship than he had realized. The sake they had shared was good enough for Jinya to come all this way to chase the memory of its flavor.

"...Actually, could you leave this as an offering to Hatsu-dono's grave for me?" The words were out of his mouth before he knew it.

"Huh? Um, I don't think Hatsu-san drank, though?"

"It's fine," he said, half forcing the bottle on the woman.

Nobody knew of Mosuke's fate, which meant none would mourn for him. But at least Jinya could leave Mosuke's favorite drink at his wife's grave. There was no knowing where the man's spirit had gone after Jinya's left arm consumed him, but if—by some slim chance—his spirit lingered in this mortal world, then it would surely find its way to Hatsu's grave one day.

Just as she had so wanted to return to him, he would certainly return to be at her side.

"It'd be a waste for me to drink such good alcohol alone anyway," Jinya said.

This was all a meaningless gesture, of course. The only spirit this would console was neither Mosuke's nor Hatsu's but Jinya's own. Still, he did it anyway, perhaps out of hope—hope that Mosuke's spirit could be joined with his wife for the rest of time.

"Please."

"Huh? Um—"

He turned around then, a faint smile on his face, and left the back-alley row house behind. The brilliance of spring blinded him for a moment, warm rays of sunshine on his eyes. The last traces of winter were gone now, and only mild

spring days waited ahead.

“Farewell, Mosuke,” he said softly. Their friendship had only lasted a short while, but it was real. On nights he drank under the moon, he would remember his drinking buddy and how his company made the alcohol taste all the better.

Two shadows strutted along in the darkness of twilight.

“The heat’s finally died down a bit. Think it’s about time for another?”

“Heh heh, how about a younger one this time?”

Two men shared a wicked, vulgar grin as they discussed most unsettling matters. They had abducted and raped women a number of times before, but hadn’t been caught by the authorities, and lived normal lives.

“I can’t believe everyone’s so stupid, though. They think all this stuff’s the work of some demon and that all the women are being spirited away.”

“No complaints from me. Just means whatever we do gets blamed on demons. Thank god for demons!”

“Thank god for demons!”

The two cackled. No matter the era, irredeemable scum like these existed.

“So, what’re we going for then?”

“Something like last time would be nice. Nothin’ beats a married woman.”

“Ugh, you got bad taste.”

“What? They resist more. Gives you a bigger feeling of superiority, you know? Speaking of, that last woman was just the best. I just couldn’t get enough of the way she struggled and called her husband’s name the whole time, ‘Mosuke, Mosukeee,’ ha ha—”

The man’s boastful recounting ended abruptly as his head toppled off and fell to the ground.

“Huh?” There had only been a short roar of wind before the head fell. The other man looked around but saw nobody. And yet the cut at the neck was clean, as though by a blade.

Humans feared what they didn't understand. Faced with the unknown, the man trembled with fear.

"Aaa—ngh...ck...?" He tried to scream, but even that was too late. Before he could even grasp what was happening, his body was cut in half.

He fell onto his back, and before he departed the world, he heard a voice as cold as lead. "It is done, Mosuke."

With a wet sound, a dagger stabbed into the man's chest, upright like a grave marker.

Those two men would be the last victims of Edo's rumored slasher. In the end, the culprit was never found. Those who disappeared were never seen again, and not a single mystery concerning the slashings was resolved. With all the rumors of a demon and spiriting away, the chain of incidents would ultimately be remembered as nothing more than another of Edo's many supernatural tales.

A book from the tail end of the Edo Period called *Spirit Tales of Ancient Japan* immortalized the supernatural happenings in a brief story called "The Invisible Demon of the Temple Town". In it, an invisible slasher goes around beheading people. The truth, however, was forever lost.

Yet again, time flew on by.

Spring approached its end.

The Garden of Happiness

1

W*HUMP...WHUMP...*

I heard a sound.

I didn't recognize it as the sound of a ball bouncing off the ground until a young girl began to sing a counting rhyme, like in a children's game.

My surroundings were dark, in twilight. I followed the distant sound and ended up at a forsaken estate.

Whump...whump...

The sound grew louder. I must've been getting closer.

The voice of the young girl teased at my ears. It was a comforting voice, and a faintly harrowing one.

...One, gaze we now on Higan's shore

...Two, home recedes till it's no more

Enticed by the song, I went through the gate and sped straight to the garden.

I reached my destination.

I looked around and saw a small pond and bewitching daffodils in bloom.

There was an elegant, sweet fragrance in the air. The thick smell of the flowers was enough to make my head spin.

I heard a splash. There must've been koi in the pond.

...Three, Mama and Papa can't be found

...Four, walk the path to ghosts underground

A small, white light danced in the air of the garden. Was it a firefly? Or perhaps a soul?

Everything felt unreal, as though I were looking at the shores of Higan in the world after death.

Was this by chance no longer the world of man I knew?

...Five, days become old stories past

...Six, yearn for all that couldn't last

The place, a traditional samurai residence, was in ruins but had proudly blooming flowers. The garden was a vibrant gray. At its center was a young girl bouncing a ball.

She was a beautiful girl with short black hair. She looked like a doll, perhaps on account of her stiff expression. She was alone in the garden as she bounced the ball and sang her counting rhyme. It was a perfectly ordinary game for a young girl to play, and yet something felt off about it—maybe the hint of sorrow around her. She wore no smile, her gaze distant as she sang.

Whump...whump... The drum of the bouncing ball sounded in tandem with my own heartbeat.

The desolate garden held all the beauty of the spirit world. The emotions resting in my heart could hold no shape.

I couldn't move. My gaze was stuck on this girl.

The place was peculiar—no, *eerie*. And yet the urge to run didn't come at all. Or perhaps my soul had simply been caught the moment I laid eyes on her?

...Seven, comes the day all tears will dry

...Eight, now at last—

The song abruptly ceased, but the sound of the ball bouncing continued unabated.

I wondered, why didn't she continue the song? I stood there for a brief moment, confused, when I heard a lisping young voice.

"This is how it ends."

Because there's no going back anymore.

It was now year six of the Kaei Era (1853 AD), autumn.

The seasons of bewitching wildflowers and scorching heat had both passed on by, and the world was dyed in the warm colors of autumn. Occasionally the wind would blow, carrying a fallen leaf off to an unknown destination. The elegance of the season was profound as a haiku, but the ever-busy townspeople of Edo had no time to stop and ponder autumn's beauty. The city was as restless as always, with people scurrying this way and that.

Among those people walked a single man with a sullen look on his face. This was Miura Naotsugu Arimori, and he had a problem haunting him.

Naotsugu was turning eighteen this year. He was the only son of the Miura family, a retainer of the Tokugawa shogunate—albeit not a wealthy one. He worked as a secretary in the Edo Castle, which was an uncommon thing at his young age. There were two kinds of secretaries in the government: ones who handled public documents, and ones who handled secret documents. He was the former, and primarily drafted licenses and similarly issued documents, as well as organized low-importance documents. He wore a fresh and crisp kimono, and had a clean-shaven head from forehead to crown with his hair in a topknot, looking like a stern and serious samurai.

His life was fairly smooth sailing, his only minor regret being the fact that his work kept him from interacting with women. His parents were healthy, and he had no siblings to speak of, so he was sure to become head of the family eventually.

The Miura family were retainers of the Tokugawa shogunate, but they were on the lower end of the pay scale and were consequently far from affluent. Still, the salary was enough to live on, so it was fair to say Naotsugu enjoyed relative financial security.

And yet, something troubled him—perplexed him, even. While most would say he lived a blessed life, he couldn't help but feel something was wrong about it all.

He couldn't possibly be the heir of the Miura family.

Natsu finished her lunch of soba without leaving anything behind, then sighed.

With a *thunk*, a new cup of tea was put on the table.

"Here, have yourself another."

"Thanks, Mister." She thanked the man, who had gone out of his way to bring the tea from the kitchen, and looked around the shop. The soba wasn't terrible, but the place was empty even though it was noon. It was curious how a restaurant could be so unpopular. "You guys get no business, huh?"

"Ha ha! You're right, but you don't need to rub it in!" Business was as poor as ever for Kihee. These days there were a few more customers than he'd had before, but things were still nowhere near good. The restaurant owner didn't seem to mind that at all, roaring with laughter at having the facts pointed out. He grinned like a naughty child and said, "Too bad that guy's not around, eh?"

"What're you talking about? I didn't come here hoping to meet him or anything."

"Is that right? Then why'd you ask if he had come by today when you walked in?"

"Well, he's always here, so I just thought it was weird he wasn't."

"Mh-hmm. If you say so. Just don't get any ideas—Jinya's got to marry my girl. I wouldn't give him up even for you."

Natsu's eye twitched. "Oh, are he and Ofuu-san like that?"

“I’d say so. The two have feelings for one another, probably.”

“Uh-huh...” She sighed, knowing there wasn’t really anything to get worked up about. The man looked at her expectantly, ready to tease her further, so she avoided replying and sipped her tea instead.

To change the topic, she said, “Where’s your daughter, anyway?”

“She’s out handling a food delivery. We got a customer from Kyoto lodging around here who orders from us every now and then.”

“Oh really? You’re starting to get some regular patrons, then.”

“Well, that customer will depart Edo eventually, so it’s a bit hard to say we’ve got a regular.”

“I see. Business is just full of ups and downs, huh?”

“That it is.”

Natsu had grown up watching her father and Zenji work, so she understood operating a business could be volatile at times.

The curtains at the entrance shifted, and a short girl in a light-pink kimono came in. A hairpin modeled after a camellia held her hair in place. “I’m back. Oh, Natsu-san. Hello.”

“Hello, Ofuu-san.” Natsu bowed her head slightly.

Ofuu, the soba restaurant owner’s only daughter, smiled warmly. “You’ve been frequenting our place quite a bit as of late, haven’t you?” She was shorter and looked younger than Natsu, but her smile felt somehow mature. One wouldn’t know how clumsy she really was just by looking at her.

“Welcome back, Ofuu. Did everything go all right?” her father asked.

“It went fine. Stop fretting over me so much, I’m not a child.”

“Don’t be silly, I’ll fret over you no matter your age,” he said somewhat glumly.

A bit embarrassed, she chuckled with a slight blush. She stored the wooden box for carrying deliveries in the back and donned an apron. As she returned to work, she happened to meet Natsu’s eyes. “Fathers can be so overprotective at

times, can't they?"

"Truly."

They shared a smile. While their fathers' personalities differed, they were unmistakably alike in that one regard.

"Why do I feel like I'm being spoken ill of here..." the restaurant owner said.

"You're not, really," Ofuu said. "I'm very proud to have you as my father."

"Heh heh, is that right?"

The sight of such a happy family lifted Natsu's own mood. Not wanting to get in the way of their moment, she put money on the table and stood. "I'll be off then. I'll leave the payment here."

"Are you sure?" Ofuu said. "You don't want to wait for Jinya-san?"

"Not you too..." Natsu groaned.

The father-and-daughter pair had hit the mark, of course. Natsu became a regular patron of this place precisely because Jinya came here. Her visit today was, as always, in hopes of meeting him again. She could properly hold a conversation with him now, since she'd matured out of being the bratty girl she once was.

"I'll be off then."

Staying around would mean getting teased, so she quickly left, gunning for the exit. She ran right into someone just coming through the entrance curtains.

"Oh, sor..." She froze mid-apology when she saw who she'd bumped into. It was a young man with a sword at his hip, a topknot, and a fresh and crisp kimono—a samurai. She immediately took a step back and bowed, shoulders trembling. "Please forgive my transgression, sir."

The difference in class between a samurai and a townspeople, even the daughter of a wealthy merchant, was great. Some ill-tempered samurai were even known to kill people on the spot for offenses, as was their legal right.

"Not at all. If anything, it was my fault for not looking ahead. Forgive me."

Surprised by the unexpected reply, Natsu raised her head and saw the man in

a slight bow. This flummoxed her. Here was a samurai from a social class far higher than her own, apologizing to her for something that had clearly been her fault.

“Ha ha, it’s all right, Natsu-chan. This here is Miura Naotsugu-sama, a samurai famous for being a total softie,” the restaurant owner said.

Sure enough, the samurai wasn’t angry. He even had a smile on his face, albeit an oddly tired one. Ofuu explained that Naotsugu was fond of her father’s friendly service and came to eat at Kihee every now and then. She and her father seemed completely comfortable with the samurai’s presence. Judging from his speech and mannerisms, Natsu concluded he must be a decent person as well.

He said, “Ha ha, calling me a softie is a bit much. Anyway, don’t worry about it, young lady.”

“O-okay,” Natsu said. “I really am sorry, though.” She bowed deeply again, then left.

Naotsugu entered the restaurant and sat down, unfazed by the run-in. In the first place, he wasn’t the type to get angry over something so petty, but especially not today, as his mind was preoccupied with other matters. “One kake soba please,” he said.

“Right away. One kake, Dad!”

“Got it!”

The restaurant owner, now back in the kitchen, quickly got to work on the order. In contrast, Naotsugu stayed fixed in his chair, sighing with a clouded expression.

“Is something wrong?” Ofuu asked with worry as she brought him a cup of tea.

“Oh.” He hadn’t realized his dejected mood was so apparent. “It’s nothing. I’m just a little worried about something.”

Naotsugu always spoke politely to others, even the common folk. The system

of social class was starting to crumble—as a result, there were even a few merchant commoners with more wealth than some samurai. Most samurai still considered themselves superior to commoners and looked down on them, but Naotsugu couldn't bring himself to take such a stance. He was often scolded by his mother for not having more pride, but his easygoing attitude actually made him easier to approach, so it wasn't all bad.

“Nothing serious, I hope,” Ofuu said.

He smiled politely. He was grateful for her worry, but his problems weren't something he could share openly. Ofuu backed off in understanding, looking at her feet a bit sadly.

“Ofuu, order's ready!”

“Coming!” She put the soba on a tray and carried it over. Her movements were still a little clumsy, but she was getting the hang of things—she only needed to pause to regain her balance a few times and could move the bowl to the table without making a big *thunk* now. “Here you are, one kake soba.”

“Thank you very much,” Naotsugu said. Still, he didn't reach for his chopsticks. He just stared in a daze at the vapor rising from the bowl, heaving another sigh.

“What's the matter, Naotsugu-sama? Ain't got an appetite?” After checking that there were no other customers around, the restaurant owner came out of the kitchen and called out to Naotsugu. Good-natured as he was, he couldn't stand to see someone in the dumps and not ask what was wrong.

Naotsugu was a fairly regular customer at Kihee by this point, and its owner was the precise reason why. The soba wasn't worth writing home about, but the way the owner would chat up customers with no fussing over social status was much to Naotsugu's liking.

Naotsugu felt he could trust the man, so he decided to confide in him. After taking a second to make up his mind, he said, “Actually... There's something bothering me that I'd like to have your input on, if that's all right.”

He wasn't sure if his seriousness got across, but the restaurant owner nodded without blinking and said, “I don't know if I can be of any help, but sure.”

“Thank you. So, I actually have an older brother, but—”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on.” The restaurant owner interrupted almost immediately. “You’re messing with me, right? You’re the heir of the Miura family, there’s no way you have an older brother.”

Naotsugu took no offense to this. He understood just how nonsensical what he said sounded. Only the eldest son could be heir, so, logically, an heir couldn’t have any older brothers—but it was precisely because he understood that fact that he was so troubled. He said, “That’s the thing. I’m *certain* I have an older brother.”

He remembered his older brother: formal public name, Sadanaga, real name, Hyouma. He was two years older than Naotsugu and the cheerful sort. This was no joke, and it was no delusion. His older brother existed, without a doubt... surely.

He continued, “But Father and Mother insist I’m wrong. Am I going insane?”

His voice was strained with grief, but what was a humble restaurant owner to do to fix his problems? The man couldn’t do anything to affirm or deny whether this unknown older brother existed, as was apparent from the troubled look on his face. All he could say was, “Eh, don’t torture yourself over this too much. Look, your noodles are getting soggy.”

Naotsugu was disappointed, but he had somewhat expected this. He’d gone around to various people, and they all reacted similarly. Frustrated, he held his tongue and gritted his teeth.

His older brother had disappeared the very moment winter ended and spring began this year. Spring and summer blazed on by, bringing them to the current melancholy of autumn, but in all that time he hadn’t found a single lead on where his older brother had gone—or if he even existed. Naotsugu asked people he knew, people his brother knew, and even complete strangers about his older brother, but they all seemed confused about the existence of such a person... Even their own mother stridently insisted that Naotsugu was, and always had been, the heir. Why did no one remember his older brother?

“Ofuu-san...” Naotsugu said.

“Y-yes?”

“I have an older brother. His name is Miura Sadanaga. Do you know him?” He reached for one last ray of hope.

Her face clouded as she sadly said, “I’m sorry.”

He expected this response but was troubled anyway. Perhaps he really was going insane, and this older brother of his was only a figment of his imagination. Depressed, his shoulders drooped.

Feeling bad for him, Ofuu said, “Um, I don’t mean to be too forward, but there’s someone I can introduce to you who may be of some help.”

“Really?” He raised his head, some life returning to him.

“Oh, right, right,” the restaurant owner chimed in, nodding and grinning. “You’re in luck, we actually have a customer who deals with these kinds of *peculiar* matters.”

Naotsugu bit his right thumb gently, a habit of his when he was thinking. Somebody who dealt with these kinds of *peculiar* matters had to be...someone who hunted spirits, yes, like a diviner or an exorcist. He said, “Is this person a diviner? Perhaps somebody who makes a living exorcizing—”

His question was drowned out by the restaurant owner’s roar of laughter. Even Ofuu covered her mouth and giggled. Seeing Naotsugu flummoxed, the restaurant owner said, “No, no, he’s just some ronin. Oh, but he’s called a Yasha guardian or something, for what it’s worth. He keeps an ear out for rumors of demons and other spirits, deals with them, and then comes here to eat soba the very next day like it was nothing. From what I hear, he kills demons with a single strike...er, not that I’ve personally ever seen him draw his sword before, but I’m sure he’s good.”

Naotsugu’s eyes widened some with recollection. He had heard of this swordsman who killed demons with a single strike. Perhaps due to all the recent unrest, there were many new rumors about demons that roamed the streets of Edo at night. But alongside these rumors came another story, one of a Yasha that hunted Edo’s demons—a guardian of the people.

“Anyway, this man solves problems with spirits.” The restaurant owner continued. “Of course, he doesn’t work for free, and I’ve only heard about his

work second-hand, but I think he might be just the guy you need.”

Perhaps the rumors weren’t just rumors. Still, Naotsugu found it all a bit hard to swallow.

As though to dispel his remaining doubts, Ofuu gently smiled and said, “He looks a bit unfriendly at first glance, but he’s actually a very kind person and can even be a bit childish sometimes. I think it’s worth at least meeting him.”

“He should be in today sooner or later,” the restaurant owner said. “He comes by daily, always getting the kake soba... Ah, speak of the devil.”

Naotsugu followed the man’s gaze and saw the restaurant’s entrance curtains parting. A towering man, six shaku in height with terribly fierce eyes, came in. He looked to be of similar age to Naotsugu and wore a clean kimono. Instead of a shaved head and a topknot, he had full shoulder-length hair that was messily tied back. He had an intense countenance but overall seemed less like the rough sort, and instead simply gruff. At his waist was a tachi sword in a scabbard as plain as he.

He was clearly a ronin, but his gait caught Naotsugu’s eye. Being a samurai, Naotsugu was somewhat trained in swordsmanship, so he understood immediately—the way the man walked straight, without shifting his weight side to side, was reminiscent of veteran sword masters who had dedicated themselves to their art for decades. The Art of Walking was the most fundamental aspect of martial arts, but to apply it perfectly outside of combat was a feat. This man was something else.

Naotsugu was very conscious of how overwhelmed he was by the man’s powerful presence. Trying to hide that fact, he asked, “Um, is that...?”

Ofuu smiled sweetly and said, “Yes. That’s Jinya-kun...our aforementioned Yasha-sama.”

Jinya made his usual visit to Kihee and found a customer other than him for once. Just one, though. Business was still poor for the restaurant, which meant he could still eat at this place for the time being.

“One kake soba,” he said.

“Coming right up. Heh, always the same thing, eh?” The restaurant owner grinned. Jinya came in almost every day, and always ordered the kake soba. “Is my kake soba just that good or something?”

“No, not particularly.”

“Yowch. You still don’t mince your words. You could stand to be a little kinder, you know?”

“...Right. Your soba is average, but it has its own charm.”

“Ha! I’ll take it.”

The restaurant owner, who had only pretended to take offense, grinned wryly at Jinya’s poor attempt at flattery. Even Jinya himself felt his attempt was pathetic. Flattery was not his strong suit.

“One kake ready.” The soba was readied quickly, as the owner had started on it the moment Jinya walked in.

“Here you are,” Ofuu said, carrying the noodles over.

“You’ve gotten better at this,” Jinya said.

“Well, of course! I’m doing my best to improve every day.”

Not too long ago—just around mid-spring, in fact—Ofuu could barely carry over one bowl of soba. Now, however, she could set up a table without needing to stop and think. Proud, she nodded to herself. Her own clumsiness must have weighed on her mind more than she let on.

She said, “Speaking of improving, do you remember what I taught you?”

“I do. Autumn is the season of tea olive. Tea olive gives off a fragrant, sweet smell and will be blooming soon.”

“Well done,” she said, like a teacher praising their student, which wasn’t too far off the mark. Ofuu has been giving Jinya lessons about flowers since that spring night when she told him he needed to learn how to relax.

He was making a conscious effort to broaden his horizons, and not just because she wanted him to. “This stuff is surprisingly interesting. I’ve even found myself noticing flowers by the wayside more,” he said.

“Right?” She smiled softly. It was the same faint, fleeting smile he’d seen when she admired the snow willows so many nights ago. He’d been seeing more of this authentic side of her lately, as opposed to her work facade. The two had known each other for quite some time now and had grown less reserved around one another.

“You’ve been smiling more as of late,” she said.

“Have I?” He certainly hadn’t realized it, but if she said so, then it must be true. But that didn’t change the fact that the hatred in his heart was still present, smoldering deep within him. He still didn’t know why he wielded his blade, and he still sought power without true purpose. So many years had passed, but he still didn’t know what he would choose to do in the very end. He was the same man he was long ago: stuck, unable to change the way of life he upheld.

“Anyway, we’ve finished learning about the flowers of all four seasons now, so I was thinking we could move on to stories about flowers.” Just as she did on that night so long ago, Ofuu comforted him under the pretense of sharing her knowledge of flowers. Unlike before, however, Jinya could now allow himself to indulge in her kindness.

“I’ll do my best to learn,” he said.

While he didn’t let it show, he felt at peace. He still couldn’t deviate from the way of life he knew, but his heart hadn’t gone completely cold. Perhaps he could find it in him to forgive Suzune one day. The hatred slumbering inside him now carried with it a small bit of hope.

“Oh, right,” she began. “There’s something I wanted to discuss with you, or rather, request of you, Jinya-kun.”

“I hate to interrupt...” The other customer stepped forward and cut Ofuu off. Jinya had seen him in the restaurant a number of times and recalled his name was Miura something-or-another. The two had never spoken to each other before, though. Jinya gave him a distrustful look, and the man bowed his head deeply in apology. “Oh, I’m so sorry, where are my manners? I’m Miura Naotsugu, and, well... I’ve heard you deal with demon rumors and other related oddities...”

Jinya knew word got around about what he did, and he got a surprising number of clients because of it. Figuring this was yet another who'd heard about him and sought his help, he replied without obfuscation. "I do. I make my living slaying demons."

"Then I can hire you to help me with this supernatural incident of mine?" The young samurai beamed in excitement, raising his voice.

Jinya frowned slightly, not because of the man's pushiness but because he was misunderstanding his work slightly. "Not quite," he said.

Naotsugu's expression stiffened. While he felt bad, Jinya had a duty to correct the misunderstanding. "I'm sorry if I got your hopes up, but I only hunt demons. I don't work on resolving supernatural incidents, except, of course, if it involves hunting demons. What you're asking about is outside of my field."

Supernatural incidents could be caused by many different spirits, not just demons. But even if a demon were the cause, Jinya was likely unable to fix whatever it had done after the fact. Scornfully, he thought that swinging his sword was all he was good for, even after all this time.

"I...see..." Naotsugu's shoulders slumped in visible disappointment. He put a number of coins on his table and left the restaurant unsteadily. His soba remained untouched.

The restaurant was awkwardly silent for a few moments, all eyes on Naotsugu as he passed under the entrance curtain.

A bit timidly, the restaurant owner broke the silence. "Hey, Jinya-kun... Think you could maybe lend Naotsugu-sama a hand?" He was relatively friendly with Naotsugu, one of his very few regular customers, and couldn't bear to see the young samurai so distraught. "His fool of a brother's gone missing, you see, and it's causing him a great deal of worry. I'm worried for Naotsugu-sama myself."

"I'd like you to help him as well," Ofuu said. "Miura-sama lost someone important to him... So, please..." She couldn't finish her words.

Jinya could only guess what ran through her mind as her blooming smile faded and her eyes grew sorrowful. Something more than sympathy seemed to be at play here. Maybe he was wrong to turn Naotsugu down. These two had

done much for Jinya, so it was only right he repay the favor.

“All right,” he said, casting his gaze downwards.

The two were elated.

“Thank you, really,” the restaurant owner said. “Oh, you can find the Miura family over in the southern part of the samurai residences. Their estate is fairly old, even for the area, so you shouldn’t have any trouble picking them out.”

“Jinya-kun... Thank you so, so much,” Ofuu said.

Their gratuitous thanks made Jinya a little uncomfortable. All these expectations were being placed on his shoulders, but he didn’t know if he’d be able to help in the first place. He said, “It’s not such a big deal, I just figure I’ll take the chance to repay you both for all you’ve done for me this past year. Why are you so concerned for this Miura-dono anyway?”

“He’s a regular of ours, and you know how few we get,” the restaurant owner joked, perhaps to hide something. “I’d rather see him cheerful, if at all possible.” He shrugged and grinned a bit bashfully.

2

EVEN NOW, I still remember. I had a kind father and a mother who always wore a smile.

I played with the ball in the garden that day.

“You really like bouncing that thing, huh?”

My father had bought me the ball. He was a stern man, a model samurai, so I don’t recall ever seeing him smile. But I do remember how he so tenderly gave me that ball. He was a man of few words, but I knew his love was true.

The wind blew.

It was still January. The air was cold, but the sky was refreshingly clear. The daffodils in the garden swayed in the wind as though playing.

My mother took care of the garden. She was so insistent on planting the

flowers she wanted that she sent our gardener away. Her stubbornness would send even my father reeling sometimes. My mother loved flowers and would teach me many things about them. This garden, her garden, was dear to me.

Father's ball and Mother's flowers. Everything was tied to this place. Even the cold wind felt warm against my cheeks here. This was my garden of happiness, my young self's paradise on earth.

But one mustn't forget—time doesn't march forward at a single steady speed. Days of suffering seem to last an eternity, and happy times leave us all too quickly. Always.

The more precious something is, the easier it is lost.

...Gaze we now on Higan's shore; home recedes till it's no more.

"What are you doing here? You realize it's only midday, right?"

It was the day after Miura Naotsugu visited Kihee. A little past noon, Jinya was taking a break at a teahouse in Fukagawa when Natsu passed by and called out to him.

He answered, "Relaxing, as you can see. Care to join me?"

He'd planned to set out for the southern part of the samurai residential area in the evening, to meet Naotsugu. He stopped by this teahouse to kill time until then and instantly ordered isobe mochi when he saw it on the menu. He sat on the bench outside the teahouse and savored it as he gazed up at the clear autumn sky. It had been a while since he could partake in the treat, but it was just as delectable as he remembered it. He much preferred it to soba.

"No, I'm good... You sure have a lot of free time on your hands, though."

"Not for long. I just got some work in."

"Is that right?"

Jinya worked as a demon hunter. Natsu presumed he did so because he had a troubled past involving demons. She frowned slightly but didn't bring the topic

up. Instead, she asked, “You like mochi?” He didn’t outwardly express his emotions much, but she could swear he looked happier than usual as he silently ate his mochi.

“Yeah. I grew up in an iron town, so stuff like this was hard to come by.”

“So you’re eating all the things you couldn’t get when you were younger, huh? Do you like mochi more than soba?”

“Yeah, I’d say so. I’ve got some memories tied to the stuff.” He sipped his tea and squinted nostalgically. Long ago, there was a girl at one teahouse who’d bring him mochi even if he didn’t ask for it. He’d never meet her again, but he had to wonder, what was she up to now?

A faint smile came to his lips as he thought back on those distant days. Natsu watched him with some wonder, then sat down beside him and ordered tea and isobe mochi herself.

“I thought you said you were good?” he said.

“Huh?” She looked at him like he was speaking nonsense, then understood and awkwardly said, “Oh. I changed my mind. I was going to head over to Kihee, but I kinda don’t feel like walking all that way, so I think I’ll have mochi for lunch instead.”

“I see.”

Natsu and Zenji were both regulars at Kihee lately. The soba restaurant was as dry of business as ever, and it seemed that drought would intensify today.

With a breezy smile, Natsu took the tea and mochi the waitress brought over and thanked her. That she could now properly thank others was proof she’d grown.

“Mmm, it tastes even better after going so long without eating it,” she remarked, taking small nibbles out of the mochi with her shoulders relaxed. She had been so tense all those years ago when she brought Jinya rice balls on the veranda of her home. Now it was like she was a different person, a more mature one. The passage of time was truly a remarkable thing.

“Oh yeah, when are you and Zenji getting married?” Jinya nonchalantly said,

as though talking about the weather.

Part of maturing, of course, was that such topics became commonplace. But the unexpectedness of his question made her choke on her mochi. She forcibly washed it down with tea, took a moment to calm down, and then glared at him. “...Where did that come from?”

“You’re sixteen already, if I recall. Now’s the time if ever, right?”

In those days, the ideal age for a woman to marry was around fifteen or sixteen. There’d be nothing strange about a girl Natsu’s age having a lover or being set up to meet with a potential suitor or two. Jinya thought what he said was completely natural, but Natsu appeared to take offense. Clearly displeased, she said, “No way. Especially not with Zenji.”

Jinya was surprised. He had been under the impression the two were lovers. “Really? I feel even Jyuuzou-dono would be okay with a man like Zenji.”

“That’s not the issue here. Zenji is...like an older brother to me. And Father has brought up meeting potential suitors, but he said I’m free to marry whoever I like.” She hesitated a bit, then smiled bashfully. “...Even though it’d be best for the store if I married into another merchant family, or even a samurai family.”

While she didn’t say it directly, it was plain as day that she was grateful to her father. Jinya smiled. He was happy to see that man had family that cared for him.

“What about you then,” she asked. “Do you have a family?”

“Well... There aren’t many eccentric enough to marry a ronin with an unstable income.”

“Ah... I see.” As her anger faded, the edge of her lips rose in a slight smile. She looked up at the sky and swung her legs, seeming oddly happy. Jinya, in a rather good mood himself, sipped his tea.

“I guess that means we’re both single for the time being,” she said.

“Indeed. What a shame,” he said, completely serious.

“Hee hee, honestly.”

Jinya neither had a wife nor a blood family to go home to. He didn’t say it

aloud, however. He didn't want to ruin the moment.

"But I suppose I *am* at the age where I need to start seriously thinking about marriage... Say, how old are you anyway?" she asked.

"Thirty-one."

"Wha—*thirty-one*?! You're older than Zenji?!" Her eyes flew wide open, but who could blame her? Jinya's appearance hadn't changed since he was eighteen. "Like, really?"

"I don't tell lies."

"Whoa... So you're almost twice my age, then? Come to think of it, you did say you don't show your age much. Is there some kind of secret routine you do to stay looking young?"

"No, not in particular." He couldn't very well come out and say he looked youthful because he was a demon. Figuring that it was best he made his exit now, he put some coins on the bench and called for the waitress. "I'll be leaving my payment here."

"You're going already?"

"Yeah. Time to work."

"...Demons again?"

He nodded and stood, then stiffened upon seeing Natsu's look of worry.

"Hey... Why do you hunt demons, anyway?" she asked. "Someone as strong as you should have other jobs available."

"You overestimate me."

"Just answer the question," she said grumpily, but he could tell her attitude came from a place of worry. He couldn't dodge the issue any more than this. It just wouldn't be right.

"...I don't really know why I hunt demons," he said. He smiled weakly, realizing he didn't actually have a proper answer to give. His voice was soft and sorrowful, a far cry from his usual rigid manner. "I myself sometimes question just what I'm doing all this for. What end does it serve?"

“You’re serious?”

“I am. Although...yes, perhaps I do it because it’s all I have left.”

Human, for what purpose do you wield your blade? Even after all this time, he still didn’t have an answer to that question.

“I see... That’s kind of a relief to hear, honestly.” She sighed, a relieved smile on her face. Jinya frowned, confused. She continued, “You always have this presence-of-mind thing going on and are a little detached from the world, you know? It makes you a bit hard to approach. That’s why it’s so reassuring to see that even someone like you actually has worries.”

“It’s more like I have nothing but worries, though.”

“And I’m saying that’s a good thing. You’re just like any normal person.” She dangled her legs happily, a childish thing, but the look on her face was serene.

“Natsu-dono...” he said, feeling an emotion he couldn’t quite define.

“Just call me ‘Natsu’ already. Don’t be such a stranger when we’ve known each other for so long.”

“...All right. Natsu it is, then.”

She nodded in satisfaction. “Good. I better get going too; it’s about time I return to the shop. Oh, and don’t worry yourself too much now. You don’t want those creases on your forehead to become permanent.”

Her words of comfort might just be platitudes, but they weren’t unwelcome. He couldn’t thank her like he wanted to, but she smiled anyway, finding his awkward reticence amusing. He smiled too, and the two left the teahouse and parted.

His chest felt warm now. Perhaps it was because of the tea.

With much more spring to his step, he made for the Miura estate.

About eighty percent of the land in Edo was occupied by samurai residences. These surrounded Edo Castle’s moat and had withstood numerous earthquakes over the years. The Miura family lived on the side south of the Edo Castle.

The day after he visited Kihee, Naotsugu prepared to leave the house and search for his brother, as he often did. The worry he felt for his missing sibling was paralyzing, but he forced himself along regardless. He affixed his uchigatana sword to his hip and tied on his straw sandals. Mentally exhausted, he set off.

“Again, Arimori?” His mother called out to him as he passed through his home’s gate. “How many times do I have to tell you? You are the family’s only son. You have no older brother.” Her words were thorny. She was fed up with seeing Naotsugu head out every night.

And he was fed up with being on the receiving end of her thorns. With some irritation, he raised his voice and said, “I *do* have an older brother.”

She ignored him and sighed. “I’ve heard you’ve even gone to the red-light district and the slums in search of this non-existent brother. Do you have any idea how badly this reflects on the family?”

“I’ll stop once I find him.”

They’d had a similar back-and-forth a number of times already. His mother was someone who cared greatly about appearances. In the Miura family, the mother was the one who strictly enforced the traditional values of a samurai household, more so than the father. Naotsugu’s mother taught him the value of justice, courage, benevolence, respect, loyalty to Tokugawa, and a willingness to fight in the Shogun’s name. In her own words, a samurai family’s honor lay in upholding its vow of loyalty, no matter how much blood had to be spilled.

Despite being in service to the shogunate, the Miura family was not wealthy, and their social standing was not particularly high. Even so, Naotsugu’s mother spared no effort in teaching him the values of a samurai. That was why having him, the heir, visiting red-light districts and slums was an act of betrayal to her. Naotsugu had always been the studious one who upheld her teachings, unlike Sadanaga, the older brother.

Sadanaga would often say, *Home isn’t where family is; wherever your family is, that’s home*. Such a way of thinking was rare among samurai, who generally considered the household more important than its constituents. For better or worse, Sadanaga was a man with a strong sense of self. He understood what it

meant to live for the Shogun and the family, but he didn't do so at the cost of his own desires. He was a free spirit. Naotsugu—an inflexible man, unlike his older brother—looked up to him for that.

Naotsugu held to the traditional samurai values that valued the household, just as his mother had instilled in him. He knew the importance of upholding honor and saw the sense in his mother's warnings.

"Enough already. Stop searching for this imaginary brother of yours."

But he could not obey her teachings now. He respected the way of life his brother had, one he himself could never follow, and he could not abandon him. Why did his brother disappear? Why did no one remember him? He needed answers to these questions, even if it meant disgracing himself as a samurai. For the first time in his life, he rebelled against what he knew.

"I'll be going, Mother."

"Arimori!"

He ignored her angry shout and left.

The autumn moon was hidden behind clouds. His surroundings were veiled in darkness. Only the faint glow of starlight slipping through clouds illuminated his path. As he walked to the bridge leading out of the samurai residential area, he considered at length where he should begin the night's search. Along the way, he came across a towering man close to six shaku in height.

"Just heading out?"

Naotsugu's eyes widened in surprise as he recognized the man standing in the darkness. "You're..."

"Jinya. But a humble ronin."

The expressionless man named himself with a voice as firm as steel.

Jinya was on his way to the Miura estate when a tense-looking samurai came walking his way. He recognized Naotsugu and greeted him. The samurai looked surprised to see him, but Jinya continued regardless. "I heard from the people at Kihee. You're looking for your older brother?" he asked.

“Y-yes, but—”

“But everyone around you says he doesn’t exist, correct?” Impossibilities like these often meant something inhuman was at play. Perhaps a demon. In that case... “I’ve changed my mind. I’ll help you with your problem.”

Jinya wasn’t just doing this because he was asked to by the owner of Kihee. If a demon were behind this, it’d be worth taking its power.

Naotsugu was shocked and in a bit of disbelief. “Really?”

“Yeah. I can’t guarantee I’ll succeed though. Do you still want my help?”

“Yes! Please! Honestly, I’m happy enough just finding someone who believes me!” Naotsugu said, overcome with emotion. It had been stressful to look for his older brother while everyone insisted he never existed. He had even started to think they were right and that he was going crazy. He smiled, relieved to have one person who believed him.

“I hate to rush things along, but could you tell me what your brother was up to before he disappeared?” Jinya asked.

“Of course. Let’s return to my place to talk... Actually, no, my mother will nag us, so we should go somewhere else.” He folded his arms and thought.

“I think I know a good place.”

The two sat down in chairs facing one another.

“You mentioned you were a ronin, Jinya-dono?”

“I did.”

“I see. That’s quite the sword you have for a ronin. Are you from a samurai family?”

“I am not.”

Naotsugu gave Jinya a look. Some rights were exclusive to samurai, such as the right to a surname and the right to wield a sword. In other words, it was a crime for a non-samurai to keep a sword on them.

Naotsugu’s impolite stare made his doubts clear. Left with no other choice,

Jinya explained, “I used to live in an iron town in the mountains. Due to the presence of spirits and mountain bandits, some of us were allowed to carry swords to defend the village.”

In the Edo Period, feudal lords often made special exceptions to allow non-samurai to carry swords. They even rewarded merchants who helped develop wastelands into rice fields, or provided significant monetary contributions to the shogunate, with the right to both surnames and swords. Given how vital they were to the government, it was no surprise that iron towns would be granted the ability to defend themselves when no samurai were available. Shrine maiden guardians were just one among such examples.

“I am one such person and was granted the right to wear a sword by the shogunate.”

That right had been granted quite a long time ago, but he had no reason to explain all that. To borrow his friend’s words, demons might not be able to lie, but they could still hide the truth.

“Is your hometown Kadono, then?” Naotsugu asked.

While he didn’t show it outwardly, Jinya was surprised. “How’d you know?”

“Well, you said you were from an iron town, and you have an iron scabbard, so I put two and two together.”

Kadono was an iron-manufacturing village about a hundred and thirty ri⁴ from Edo. It was famous for its swordsmiths, their swords extolled as capable of rending even demons. Kadono swords stood out with their iron scabbards and thick blades, built for durability. Such swords were rare centuries ago during the Warring States period, but they were even rarer now, as very few places had continued to dedicate themselves to making blades meant for rigorous combat. One could not call themselves knowledgeable in weaponry without knowing of Kadono.

“It’s a little embarrassing to admit, but I’m something of a sword aficionado,” Naotsugu said, scratching at his cheek bashfully. “I enjoy learning about weapons and such things, and have heard Kadono swords were unique for their unembellished iron scabbards. I can’t help but notice, however, that your

scabbard is particularly simple.”

“Ah... This sword used to be enshrined in my village as a sacred sword. It was bestowed unto me for reasons,” Jinya answered.

“I see. An enshrined sword’s appearance would be important, wouldn’t it? Might I know your sword’s name?”

Naotsugu followed up with more questions, his bashfulness fading as he grew more and more intrigued by Jinya’s sword. Jinya was surprised by the man’s unexpected enthusiasm and had to wonder if all aficionados got like this.

“It’s called Yarai.”

“Yarai...” Naotsugu repeated with interest. “I see... To drive away evil spirits is sometimes called oni-yarai, so maybe it’s a play on Kadono swords’ claim to fame—blades capable of rending demons? Or maybe the sword itself is famed for slaying demons... Are there such legends surrounding the sword?”

“Not that I know of. My village chief did say it wouldn’t rust even if a thousand years passed, not that I know if that’s true.”

“Incredible,” Naotsugu said, with perhaps a bit too much excitement. He muttered something to himself for a bit, then worked up the courage to look Jinya in the eye and ask, “Would you be willing to show me the blade?”

“No,” Jinya said flatly. He gave the man a cold look, as though to say, *Were you not looking for your older brother?*

“Ah...” Catching the hint, Naotsugu smiled guiltily. It seemed he had a habit of getting carried away where his hobby was involved. He bowed his head deeply and said, “Sorry about that. I got a little off topic there...”

“It’s fine, but let’s get started, please.”

“Right. As you already know, I’m looking for my older brother, Miura Sadanaga.” Naotsugu’s expression tensed as he finally got to the issue at hand, and his voice deepened. Jinya fixed his posture and looked the man in the eye. Naotsugu continued, “I’ve been searching for him for a long while now, but I haven’t made any progress. Far from it—nobody else even seems to remember him.”

“Nobody?”

“Nobody. Not even my mother and father remember him. They insist that I’m the only son and that they don’t know anyone called Sadanaga. I’ve asked around, and while there are some with faint memory of him, there’s nobody that really remembers him but me...”

The air grew tense. After a moment, Naotsugu opened his mouth to speak again, but their discussion was interrupted.

“Er, I hate to cut in...” Jinya and Naotsugu were getting sidetracked again, this time by the owner of Kihee. With a troubled and confused look, he said, “But why’d you choose to have such an important discussion here?”

The place the two had come to talk was Kihee, the soba restaurant.

“Ah, well, my mother would nag us if we discussed this at my place, you see,” Naotsugu said. “That’s why Jinya suggested we come here.”

“That’s understandable, but shouldn’t you have this kind of talk somewhere more private?” The restaurant owner looked at Jinya.

“Seeing as so few customers come by, I figured this place was as private as it gets.”

“...I can’t believe you’ve gone and said it.” The restaurant owner put his hand to his head as though dizzy. It was a fact that Kihee got little to no business, but having it pointed out so directly still hurt.

“Dad...” Ofuu said.

“I know, I know. I won’t get angry at him, not when he’s going to be my future son-in-law.”

Jinya was surprised to hear the man hadn’t given up on that courtship. Still, addressing that now would only make things complicated, so Jinya pretended he heard nothing. Even without him saying anything, Ofuu would probably tell her father off later.

...Or right now, as it turned out. Honestly, this father and daughter pair never changed.

Jinya said, “Jokes aside, I brought Miura-dono here because you two seemed

worried about him.”

Ofuu stopped lecturing her father and looked at Jinya warmly.

“Is something wrong?” Jinya asked.

“No, I’m just relieved you’re able to crack jokes now.” That he’d had eased up enough to joke around delighted her, even more than the fact that he had thought of them when bringing Naotsugu here. She felt the same joy an older sister might feel watching a younger brother grow up.

It wasn’t completely unwelcome, but her warm gaze did make Jinya a bit uncomfortable. Despite appearances, he really was thirty-one. Being treated like a child was kind of humiliating. “...Right. Anyway, Miura-dono, could you tell me more about your older brother? When did he disappear?”

“O-oh, yes, um... He disappeared the beginning of spring this year, sometime around the end of January, I believe.”

“That was more than a month before those slasher incidents happened... Was there anything of note going on with him before he disappeared?”

“Not really. He didn’t even mention if he was going anywhere in particular, he just up and vanished one day... Oh. Sorry, that’s not quite right. He did say he was going to visit his daughter.” Naotsugu bit his thumb as he entered deep thought.

The restaurant owner and Ofuu listened silently, the conversation turning a bit too tense for them to interject on.

Naotsugu continued, “Also, there was a flower left in Sadanaga’s room.”

“A flower? What kind?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t really know much about flowers, sadly. It had a strong scent, though, as well as white petals around a yellow center, thin leaves, and a stem. It was fairly small, if I recall correctly. My brother wasn’t particularly fond of flowers, so I remember thinking it strange when I found it in his room.”

Jinya tried to envision the flower from his description. Of the various names he learned from Ofuu, one in particular came to mind. “Perhaps a daffodil?” He looked to Ofuu for confirmation and saw her nod slightly. A pleasant smell, a

long stem, and thin leaves were characteristic of daffodils. Their petals could be white as well, so almost everything matched Naotsugu's description. Only the part about the flower being small stood out. "But you said this flower was small? Hmm..."

"Well, I can't really be sure. From my limited understanding, it seemed small," Naotsugu said, unsure.

"It could also be a stewartia, fishwort, or a cape jasmine. It's impossible to tell from a second-hand description alone," Ofuu added. It seemed there was no way of knowing for sure.

"When did you find this flower?" Jinya asked.

"Just after he disappeared. I'm the only one who's visited his room, so I think it's possible he left it himself."

Since they didn't remember his existence, nobody else in the family would have a reason to visit the room, much less leave a flower. There was a good chance the older brother had done it, like Naotsugu thought. Jinya, however, was interested in the flower for a different reason. "Is that flower still there?" he asked.

"No, but I did press its petals and leaves into paper before it could wilt. I thought it'd help prove my brother was real."

"Good thinking."

If it could wilt, then the flower itself must be normal. Naotsugu's description of the flower most closely matched a daffodil, but if that was true, then things would get complicated.

"Do you think you could bring it here... Actually, no, I think I'd rather have you bring me to the Miura estate, if that's all right with you," Jinya said. Having found a lead, he took on a keen air.

Just don't let it be a daffodil, he thought. He hesitated to share this worst possible scenario with Naotsugu.

“OH MY. Someone’s full of energy today.”

I bounced my ball in a flower-filled garden. Befuddled by the strong scent of daffodils. The cold touch of winter warm against my cheek.

“Daddy! Watch me!”

“I’m watching, I’m watching.”

“She’s gotten better at bouncing that thing, don’t you think?”

My mother and father watched from the veranda.

Happy to have their warm eyes on me, I bounced my ball harder and heard my mother giggle.

Time passed quickly on peaceful afternoons like this. I’d get lost in play, and evening would arrive before I knew it, like now. An orange glow was creeping closer on the horizon. It wouldn’t be long before sunset was here.

“Huh?”

How strange.

The sun was still high, but the sky was orange.

I was wrong. Evening wasn’t here yet. That orange glow was from a fire.

A black plume rose in the distance. A bell was being rung. Voices could be heard frantically moving this way and that.

“Chiyoda Castle’s...on fire?”

Following my father’s voice, I looked to the castle at Edo’s center and saw its main keep wrapped in flame. The air quickly grew feverishly hot. It took a moment before it became clear that the fire was spreading through the city.

I thought to run, but as soon as I did, the flames—stirred fiercely by the wind—leapt upon my home. Before my eyes, the blaze spread as though alive. I heard wood crack and pop as my home burned in an inferno.

I was scared. Without a second thought, I ran to my father. So scared. I wanted to feel my father’s reassuring touch and hear my mother’s comforting words, even just a second sooner.

I ran and ran. Right when I was about to reach them, I reached out. But the moment I did, the fire opened its maw and swallowed them whole.

“Wha...?”

For a moment, I didn’t understand what had happened.

Far and near, I heard screams all over. The world around me blurred orange like the evening sky, and my breathing grew labored on air smoky with ash.

Sunset was here for me.

Mother...

Father...

My peaceful afternoon had vanished so quickly. My father’s firm but warm gaze and my mother’s gentle smile were gone. Instead, two figures cloaked in flames reached out to me.

They were with me, smiling, only moments ago. And now they were something else.

In my fear, I screamed, but only a weak shrill came out. I told myself to flee as far as I could, but all my legs did was tremble.

The pillars of my home burnt to nothing before my eyes. With nothing to support it, the roof slid towards me like an avalanche, its cascading cacophony drowning out even the screams until finally—

Nothingness.

Just like that, my garden of happiness came to an end.

...Mother and Father can’t be found; walk the path to ghosts underground.

Jinya made plans to go to the Miura estate and meet Naotsugu in the evening of the next day. At noon, with ample time left, and needing a meal, he found himself walking to Kihee.

“Oh, Jinya.”

“...Natsu.”

He arrived to find Natsu nonchalantly drinking tea. He was still a little hesitant to use her name without any honorifics attached, which she picked up on, grinning at him. She beckoned him to sit at the same table, so he did.

“One kake soba,” he said.

“Coming right up,” the restaurant owner replied. Such was their usual exchange. This time, however, the restaurant owner seemed a little worried about something. “...Say, Jinya-kun, since when did you drop honorifics with Natsu-chan?”

“About a couple days ago or so,” he answered.

The restaurant owner turned to Ofuu and, with a grave look, said, “Ofuu... hang in there.”

She replied, “Father, what in the world are you on about?”

It seemed the restaurant owner still intended to get Jinya married to his daughter. While flattered to be thought so highly of, Jinya had to wonder why the man was so keen on him in the first place.

“I see you two have gotten quite close,” Ofuu said.

“I guess. Not like that, though,” Natsu replied.

The two girls shared some friendly chatter, which was fine, but Jinya felt a bit uncomfortable about it, especially since he was the topic of their chatter. He had something he wanted to ask anyway, so cut in and said, “Ofuu, are you close with Miura-dono?”

“Me? I wouldn’t say we’re close, but we do talk when he comes by,” Ofuu answered, confused. “Why?”

There was no deeper meaning to his question; he simply wanted to learn more about what kind of person Naotsugu was. He said so, which put Ofuu in momentary thought.

“Right, well... He seems to be polite to everyone, including me. He’s a kind man, if perhaps a bit too serious.”

“Are you guys talking about that one samurai?” Natsu asked.

“Yes. Come to think of it, you did meet him a while back, didn’t you?” Ofuu said.

“I didn’t ‘meet’ him so much as bump into him, but I do remember thinking he was very modest for a samurai.”

Their descriptions of Naotsugu lined up with Jinya’s own impressions. Serious and polite, mellow and modest. The man was most unlike a samurai indeed.

“Oh, but he’s another person entirely when he’s got a sword in front of him,” the restaurant owner chimed in. Jinya looked over and saw the man with a cheerful grin on. “Naotsugu-sama’s an utter sword fanatic. You should see how his eyes light up when he talks about them.”

Jinya had to agree. Even when the two met to discuss his missing older brother, Naotsugu’s attention had initially been entirely on Yarai. The man looked like the no-nonsense sort, but he could get surprisingly off-track—and pushy—when his hobby got involved.

“That man’s love for swords is quite extraordinary. Oh, speaking of which, give me a second.”

Saying that, the restaurant owner slipped into the back, rummaged around, then returned with something wrapped in a cloth. “Here, take a look at this,” he said as he unwrapped the cloth and revealed a small, cylindrical metal item. It was well maintained and clearly treated with lots of care.

“Huh. A hair-needle?” Natsu said curiously.

Hair-needles were used to help make topknots and other hairstyles, as well as to scratch an itchy head without ruining a hairstyle. They were an indispensable personal grooming tool for women. As the daughter of the owner of Sugaya, a store that dealt in small trinkets like netsuke sculptures and combs, Natsu was familiar with what a hair-needle was.

Men sometimes used hair-needles as well, with samurai keeping one in a slot on their sword scabbard. This hair-needle was part of a set of three sword items once considered standard for a samurai to carry, the other two being a decorative hilt-piece and a small knife. But things were slightly different in the

Edo Period. Social norms dictated that only high-status samurai could have a hair-needle and a small knife on their swords. Furthermore, feudal-lord families and families that were retainers of the shogunate were required to have the fittings and items on their sword made by the prestigious Gotou metalsmiths.

“The Miura family ain’t the wealthiest, but they are retainers of the shogunate, so I guess they keep things like this,” the restaurant owner said. “I got this hair-needle here as a gift from Naotsugu-sama. That man’s such a sword fanatic, even his presents are sword-related.”

The hair-needle the restaurant owner held was made of metal, but it wasn’t of Gotou craftsmanship. Its metal surface was dull with age and its artistry modest. The relief of a wisteria could be seen on it.

“It’s fairly well made. The wisteria relief adds a nice, refined touch. Whoever made this is quite the craftsman,” Natsu said with admiration.

“Is that right? Heh. That’s nice and all, but I’m not quite sure what a soba restaurant owner like me is supposed to do with something like this.” The restaurant owner grinned wryly. There was a softness to his grin though, perhaps because Natsu complimented the hair-needle. “Honestly, that man... If you let him pick the topic, the conversation will either turn all formal or wind up being about swords, no in-between. I remember his mother always had to yell at him to shut up when he got to talking about swords, ‘Not another word out of you, Arimori!’ and such.” He let out a soft sigh, his gaze distant and nostalgic. The two seemed closer than your typical customer and restaurant owner. Perhaps that was why he cared so much about Naotsugu’s worries.

One thing the man said was of interest to Jinya, however. “You know Miura-dono’s mother?”

“Huh? Oh, I’ve seen her a couple of times. She’s a little intimidating and a bit of a nag, I’d say.”

Jinya remembered Naotsugu saying something along those lines himself. He wanted to ask more questions but refrained from doing so in Natsu’s presence. He’d rather not bring up mothers around her any more than necessary, if he could help it.

The restaurant owner’s eyes went wide, like he had a brilliant idea, then he

stepped forward and said, “You know what, why don’t you take this off my hands, Jinya-kun?”

Jinya was bewildered by the sudden offer. Even Natsu and Ofuu seemed taken aback. It was a terribly rude thing to regift a gift. What was more, it was clear the restaurant owner himself was fond of the hair-needle. His willingness to part with it despite all that was downright mystifying.

“That was a present from Miura-dono, right? I can’t possibly take it from you,” Jinya said.

“It’s fine. I have no use for it anymore. Please, take it from me.” He bowed his head deeply.

Jinya didn’t understand what the man was thinking, but he could tell he wouldn’t fold no matter what objections were made. Therefore, he relented. “... All right. I’ll take it off your hands for now.” Even so, he phrased his acceptance in a way that made the restaurant owner still the hair-needle’s owner, technically.

It seemed that was enough for the restaurant owner. He broke into a cheerful smile. “Thank you, Jinya-kun. You’re a big help, really.”

“I’m sorry about my dad,” Ofuu said apologetically with a bow.

There was no need for Jinya to show gratitude, since he was practically having the hair-needle forced onto him. So instead, he reiterated, “I’m just taking this off your hands for now though, okay?”

“I understand. Even so, thank you,” the restaurant owner said.

In the end, the discussion ended without any understanding of what the man wanted. Jinya began eating his soba. It tasted the same as it always did, but for some reason he couldn’t enjoy it.

The sun was already beginning to sink on the horizon by the time Naotsugu finished the day’s work at Edo Castle. Even with his brother missing, he didn’t skip out or cut corners with work. He was too earnest a man for that.

He walked home at a brisk pace. Somebody was waiting for him today. His

fellow secretaries jokingly asked if he had a girl he was hurrying back to, but sadly, the one waiting for him was a man, and a tall, muscular one at that. There was nothing romantic here.

With such profoundly inane thoughts on his mind, Naotsugu went through the castle gate, then reached the bridge crossing the outer moat. There he found Jinya, as expressionless as always, waiting for him.

“Lead the way,” Jinya said curtly, without so much as a greeting. He said nothing further after that.

Naotsugu had a feeling Jinya had been hung up on something since yesterday. While his expression was flat, he had an air of tension about him. This made Naotsugu feel a bit tense himself as he led the way to his home. In less than a fourth of a koku⁵—or about thirty minutes—they reached the Miura estate. It was located on a large plot of land, but the buildings themselves looked time-worn.

“We’re here. Make yourself at home,” Naotsugu said after entering through his home’s gate first.

Jinya looked around at the exterior of the estate, then gave a short, polite nod as he followed. He seemed less curious about the place and more like he was looking for something. To the front was the main building, to the right a largely-unused detached building with a single room, and to the left was an overgrown camellia tree before a wide garden, the estate’s one point of pride. In all, the layout was fairly standard for a samurai family and was certainly of little note to Naotsugu, who lived here.

The same could not be said for Jinya, however. He froze for a moment upon stepping foot inside but said nothing before following Naotsugu inside to the main building.

“Naotsugu... Oh? Do we have a guest?”

Naotsugu froze up at his home’s entrance. Greeting the two was a stern-looking woman with a strong posture: Naotsugu’s mother. Her tone was firm at first—she had likely been waiting to lecture him when he got back—but upon seeing Jinya, her voice softened. Their reprieve only lasted for a moment,

however. After looking Jinya up and down, her gaze turned questioning. Naotsugu caught on and opened his mouth to make an excuse, but Jinya spoke up before he could.

“Pardon my sudden visit. I hope it’s not too much trouble. I am Jinya, an acquaintance of your son’s.” He spoke with an elevated level of politeness, something unexpected from both a ronin and a man of his size.

Politeness had to be returned with politeness, of course, so Naotsugu’s mother responded in kind. “Well, how very proper of you. Naotsugu, dear, how’d you come to meet Jinya-sama?” Her eyes, however, showed she still remained suspicious of Jinya.

Still polite, Jinya once again answered before Naotsugu could. “I hail from a village known as Kadono, you see.”

“My, the one with all the swordsmiths?”

“The very same.”

The mother’s attitude softened again upon hearing of Jinya’s hometown. Seeing the opportunity, Naotsugu quickly added, “Jinya-dono is a kindred spirit I’ve had the honor of meeting recently. I called him over so we could chat over some drinks tonight.”

A lie, of course, but his mother seemed to buy it. Naotsugu was a sword aficionado like no other, and Kadono was a village famous for its swordsmiths. It made sense that Naotsugu would invite Jinya over for them to revel in a shared hobby.

“The two of us will just be in my room.” Naotsugu made to leave then, allowing his mother no time to ask any follow-up questions.

Jinya bowed to her. He was about to follow after Naotsugu when a soft voice stopped him in his tracks. “Thank you kindly, Jinya-sama.”

He turned around and saw the mother, who shouldn’t have a clue what was really going on, standing with her head bowed to him. Both Naotsugu and Jinya were stumped by this gesture. Still as expressionless as ever, but with his brow just slightly raised, Jinya said, “I haven’t done anything worth your thanks.”

“But you have. My son’s been depressed for a time now, but today he seems full of life again. As a mother, nothing could make me happier.”

Naotsugu made no effort to hide his surprise. Lately, he’d been repeatedly scolded for searching for his brother, and he held a grudge against her for that. But she genuinely cared for him and realizing that made him feel shame.

Jinya courteously said, “I wanted to come myself, so really, there is nothing you need to thank me for.”

“I-It’s fine, Jinya-dono, let’s just hurry up and go,” Naotsugu insisted. He was starting to feel bashful, so he hurried Jinya along. He heard his mother sigh warmly from behind him, which only made him blush harder.

“You have a nice mother.” As soon as the two got to—or rather, escaped to—Naotsugu’s room, Jinya remarked on Naotsugu’s mother. His expression was as unreadable as ever, but Naotsugu felt the man’s words weren’t just lip service but genuine.

“Not at all, all she does is embarrass me. That aside, I didn’t know you could speak as eloquently as you just did.” Naotsugu changed the topic to avoid discussing that embarrassing debacle with his mother. He was genuinely mystified how a ronin could know how to speak so courteously.

“It’s just something I picked up from my past,” Jinya answered.

“Oh?”

“It’s nothing worth mentioning. More importantly, the flower.”

“Right, of course.” Naotsugu had no intention of pursuing the topic if Jinya didn’t want to. He brought out the flower that he had found in his brother’s room, which he had pressed when it began to wilt. Its appearance had warped some, but it was still recognizable. “Here.”

Jinya took the pressed flower and observed it intensely, his expression growing grimmer by the moment. With some strain in his voice, he said, “...It’s a daffodil.”

Daffodils weren’t rare by any means. But for some reason, Jinya seemed shocked. “Is there anything noteworthy about this daffodil?” Naotsugu asked.

“No. Though it is a little smaller than I thought it’d be, I suppose.”

The room with its tatami mat floor was kept neat and tidy, and the standing paper lantern bathed everything in orange. Jinya’s shadow wavered on the wall slightly.

Naotsugu turned his gaze back to Jinya and found he was calm again.

“Miura-dono, I hate to repeat myself, but I need to make this doubly sure: You’re certain you found this flower in Sadanaga-dono’s room after he disappeared around spring?”

“Y-yes.”

“I see. One more thing: You’re certain he mentioned he was going to visit his daughter before he disappeared?”

“I am.” Naotsugu couldn’t see the purpose of these questions. He was about to ask when Jinya spoke first.

“Then I have a feeling this daughter might be a demon and that Sadanaga-dono was taken someplace beyond the human world.” Jinya held up the daffodil.

“And you think this flower comes from that demon’s home?”

Jinya nodded gravely.

Naotsugu found it hard to agree with the idea. His brother might be missing, but it was quite the leap in logic to say he had been taken someplace outside their world, especially when this was all based on the existence of a flower. He said, “But don’t flowers bloom just about anywhere?”

“They do, I suppose. Could you show me Sadanaga-dono’s room? There could be a clue left there.” Jinya’s eyes were gravely serious. It didn’t seem like he was joking.

After a short silence, Naotsugu said, “All right. Follow me.” He stood up, a little tense. But for some reason, Jinya remained seated.

“Sorry, could you go on ahead?”

“Huh? Uh...”

“I’ll follow soon after. Just wait for me in his room.”

“But you won’t know where it is...?”

“It’ll be fine.”

Naotsugu was perplexed. Jinya wanted him to show him his older brother’s room, but also not? Naotsugu hadn’t a clue what the man wanted, and yet, as strange as it was, he had total faith in Jinya.

His older brother was definitely real. But no matter how much he tried to convince others, nobody believed him, not even his own mother and father. But Jinya was different. Jinya believed in his brother’s existence. That was why Naotsugu could have faith in Jinya now, in return for the faith Jinya had shown him.

“Is this something necessary to solve this incident?” Naotsugu asked.

“Yes, I do believe so,” Jinya answered without hesitation. He didn’t seem to be making this up. This was likely something beyond a layman’s understanding.

“I understand. Then I’ll head over first.” Naotsugu left the room and walked down the corridor with confident steps. There wasn’t a hint of worry in him.

Jinya watched him go and, in a faint voice, whispered, “Sorry, but there’s no telling if my presence will change things.”

Alone, Naotsugu entered his older brother Sadanaga’s room. The furnishings inside hadn’t been used in a long while, but there was no dust, as the place was cleaned regularly.

His older brother spent most of his time out of the house and only returned here to sleep. Because of that, little in the room gave away what he had been like as a person. The daffodil Naotsugu had found was the only time he’d ever seen a flower in the room at all. In fact, the room was best described as lifeless and barren. It was not a room befitting a man who’d become heir of the household.

Huh... Come to think of it... Naotsugu began to think to himself. His brother’s room was still here, so how could his parents still insist he didn’t exist? He only

just realized the strangeness of that contradiction. How could he have not realized it sooner...

His train of thought was interrupted by a sudden scent. A pleasant, fragrant smell. He'd smelled it before; here in this room, in fact.

Yes, this was the smell of that one white flower. What did that man call it again?

...A daffodil?

The moment he remembered its name, the smell grew thick and overwhelming, making him dizzy. He felt lightheaded, and his vision blurred. The inside of his head seemed to slosh back and forth.

What was this sensation?

He didn't know, but he was helpless against it and fell to his knees.

...One, gaze we now on Higan's shore

In the distance, he could swear he heard a counting rhyme being sung.

4

I THOUGHT I HAD DIED. But as it turned out, I was conscious and could still move my body. I would live yet.

I questioned how that could possibly be as I crawled out from beneath the rubble. Perhaps it would have been better to have died. I looked around myself and saw that nothing was left. The house had collapsed, the garden flowers had burned away, and my ball was nowhere to be found.

I stood in a daze. I had lost everything. My father. My mother. My home. Why was only I left alive?

I was brokenhearted. But staying in this emptied place pained me, so I left.

Everything in the southern samurai residential area had burned down. The

fire, which was unlike any before it, eventually abated. All that remained in its wake was ruin. What was left could not be called Edo. Not a trace of the place I grew up in remained. It was as though the fire had trampled over even my memories of the place.

I walked aimlessly. Eventually, I noticed a crowd of onlookers looking at me and trembling. I wondered to myself why they were trembling. Then I wondered again how I was even alive after being crushed by rubble and enveloped in flames.

“Hey, look...”

“Red eyes...”

“Do you think...?”

“No doubt about it.”

They whispered fearfully as they watched me, their eyes full of disgust.

Listening to them, I came to understand that humans became demons when they fell to negative emotions like jealousy, hatred, or despair. That must be why.

I had lost my father, my mother, my home, even the memories of this place I held dear. And now...

“Isn’t that girl a demon?”

I had lost my very self.

So, I ran. I ran away from it all.

I have no idea how much time passed. After running away from Edo, I wandered from place to place as though floating along in water, aimless and adrift. There was no going back for me. My garden was gone. I could only see it in passing dreams.

Warm spots bathed in sunlight. Mother and Father. Days of happiness when I could still smile. Every time I closed my eyes, I could still vividly see it all—my garden of happiness, all the more beautiful now that it was only a memory.

Mother...

Father...

I lived my life forever reminiscing on what I'd lost.

Ten years passed. I reached maturity.

Twenty years passed. I stopped aging.

Fifty years passed. I mingled among people and lived without purpose.

My suffering lasted an eternity, but the decades sped on by, nonetheless.

I could no longer remember my father's face, nor my mother's voice. So much time had passed that their memory faded. But when I closed my eyes, I still saw those bygone days of happiness.

An even greater stretch of time passed. Not a trace of those times remained with me, only sadness. Time continued to pass me by as I lived on, bound by what I had lost. I didn't want to live anymore. But I was afraid of dying and letting the memory of those two figures cloaked in flame fade, so I lived on, just going through the motions. I didn't know how many hundreds of years a demon's life span lasted, but surely it couldn't be forever.

Around the time of my hundredth year, something changed.

I was back in Edo for the first time in a long while. Nobody I knew remained. The streets themselves had transformed, unrecognizable. I found myself naturally walking towards the southern part of the samurai residential area. Driven by homesickness, I walked and walked, before finally reaching it—the place I had once lived.

"Ah..."

A fine estate now stood there. It was not my old home, of course. The area had been rebuilt after the great fire. Living here now was a different family. This was no longer a place for me. I knew coming here would be pointless. And yet, I so wanted to believe.

"...Mother...Father..."

Unable to stop my tears, I cried. It felt like the world itself had rejected me. A

hollowness filled my heart as I came to understand there was truly nothing left for me, and I clung to one last, hopeless desire.

I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home.

I thought back to my garden of happiness, to the days I spent with Mother and Father, smiling without a care in the world.

All I wanted was to return to those times.

“Huh...?”

Then, everything changed. Before I realized it, the sun had set, and twilight had arrived. The estate before me was now in ruins.

“What’s going on...?”

I didn’t understand what was happening. I had so many questions. But the estate felt familiar, so I crossed through the gate. My feet had a life of their own. I headed to the left and sped straight for the garden.

Then, I reached it.

I looked around to see a small pond and bewitching daffodils in bloom. There was an elegant, sweet fragrance in the air. The thick smell of flowers was enough to make my head spin.

I heard a splash. There must’ve been koi in the pond.

I knew this place. How could I not? This was the home I was born to. My distant garden of happiness.

“Oh my. Someone’s full of energy today.”

Suddenly, there were two people sitting out on the veranda. I thought I had forgotten them, but I recognized them right away.

“Mother...Father...”

My father’s face was as stern as ever, but his gaze was so gentle. They spoke in a voice that rang nostalgic.

“I’m watching, I’m watching.”

“She’s gotten better at bouncing that thing, don’t you think?”

What are you saying? I thought, then looked at my hands. They were small again, like they were when I was a child, and in them was the ball I had lost.

I hadn’t a clue what was happening. But that was fine. The moment I had lost was back again. And nothing else mattered.

I bounced the ball to take back my past, to cling to this garden of happiness. I had the ball my father bought me and was surrounded by my mother’s flowers. I needed nothing else.

I would keep singing my counting rhyme and bouncing my ball forever if I had to.

I was adrift in a haze. Even now, I remained stuck in my garden of happiness.

...Days become old stories past; yearn for all that couldn’t last.

The flowery fragrance dizzied Naotsugu, confounding his senses for a brief moment. In that moment, he saw a strange dream, one that spanned half the lifetime of a girl he’d never seen before.

On his knees, he shook his head twice, then a third time, to shake his senses awake. Then he looked around and found he was not in his older brother’s room. *Huh...?* The room looked similar, but everything from the furnishings to the smaller articles was slightly different. *What is going on?* Astonished, his mind raced and he bit his thumb.

“Looks like an old-fashioned samurai home.”

“Whoa?!” Suddenly, hearing a voice nearby, Naotsugu backed away a few steps. An almost-six-shaku-tall man had appeared by his side without him noticing. “J-Jinya-dono?”

“But its make is different from the Miura estate. It seems we’ve wandered our way into a place that’s not quite your brother’s room.” Jinya cast a sharp gaze around, noticing the discrepancies.

Naotsugu was more concerned with something else, however. "...Um, Jinya-dono?"

"Yes?"

"I could swear you weren't with me up until now... So how...?" Naotsugu was certain he entered his older brother's room alone and that no one else entered behind him. So how was Jinya here? It was like he had appeared out of thin air.

Flatly, Jinya answered, "Ah. I used a little trick. Don't worry about it." This trick in question was one he practiced until he could use it in his normal form. He didn't seem keen on sharing this trick with Naotsugu however, instead continuing with, "Putting that aside, did you see that just now?"

"See what?"

"The fire. The girl who became a demon and left to wander. Her home that impossibly reappeared."

Naotsugu's eyes widened. Those were the exact things he had seen moments ago, in his strange dream. "I did see that. You did too?"

Jinya nodded. Naotsugu's surprise wore off and was replaced with unease. "If we both saw it, then..."

"It must not have been a daydream."

It was now clear the two were in the midst of something supernatural. A cold shiver ran up Naotsugu's back, but Jinya was as placid as always, perhaps used to these kinds of situations. His voice, however, did seem a bit more pleased than usual. "We found it."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember? We're after a demon living in a place outside the human world, just like the dream showed us."

Naotsugu thought back to Jinya's guesswork from earlier. The ronin had predicted this. Naotsugu's older brother had said he was leaving to see his daughter. Perhaps this daughter was a demon, and Naotsugu's brother had been taken to a place not quite the human world, meaning...

"You think my brother was taken here?" Naotsugu asked.

“I don’t know if he was taken or came of his own volition, but yes.”

Naotsugu gulped. After much searching, he was finally nearing a resolution. Still, he had to wonder how Jinya knew so much. As strange as the situation was, the ronin’s extensive knowledge was equally strange. Naotsugu asked, “But how’d you know? What tipped you off that my brother wasn’t in the human world? I mean, you were right, of course, but I just can’t see how you came to the conclusion.”

Without even turning to look at him, Jinya just said, “I know a thing or two about flowers,” then left the room.

“Um, where are you going?”

“There’s no point standing around here. I’m going to search the area a bit.”

“Oh. Right, I’ll come too.”

The two walked down the corridor together. It was twilight outside. The end of the corridor was too dark to make out. The whole place was entirely eerie, all the more so with the knowledge that it was a demon’s home.

The wooden floorboards looked worn but didn’t creak when stepped on. The house’s make was, as Jinya had said, an old-fashioned style that had been common for samurai residences in that past. The layout wasn’t too different from the Miura residence, however, so they managed to reach the entrance without getting lost.

They exited to the outside and saw a dark sky above. The darkness of twilight was gloomy, but it was also a perfect match for this style of the house. The gate that stood before them was impressive, meaning the samurai who had once lived here were likely of high rank.

“Hmm... This latch won’t budge.” Naotsugu tried to open the gate to test if they could go outside but to no avail. They were stuck inside the estate.

Jinya tried the latch, but he couldn’t move it either. The latch didn’t look that heavy, but it was somehow stuck in place. “I guess we can’t just up and leave,” he said calmly. He, the rumored Yasha guardian, seemed to have nerves of steel. Unlike the flustered Naotsugu, Jinya was analyzing the situation and thinking. Out loud, he ruminated, “That young girl we saw is likely the cause of

this. Perhaps she has a power that allows her to trap things... No, that wouldn't explain the earlier daydream."

Naotsugu was lost and grew even more confused at this mention of powers. He hated to be a burden but couldn't help but ask, "I'm sorry, what's this about a power?"

"Demons awaken to a power after a hundred years of life, although some do earlier than that. These powers can be anything from seeing the future to incredible strength and differ from demon to demon; but any demon with a power is called a superior demon."

"Then you think that girl we saw in that daydream earlier made this place with her power?"

"...Perhaps."

"You don't seem so sure."

"I just can't quite place what kind of power would allow her to cause all this. At any rate, we can't get out without either figuring out what the demon's power is or slaying the source."

Jinya entered deep thought again, and this time, Naotsugu held back on disturbing him and looked around at their surroundings. As pathetic as it was, he could do nothing to help except keep vigilant. He watched carefully, trying not to miss a single thing, but there was no movement around—not even any wind. The place was dead silent. He had never heard such a lack of noise before. It was so quiet he could hear his ears ringing.

Then, all of a sudden, something faint echoed from some unknown distance away. The sound came at a steady pace and was so faint it would have blended into the background if not for the estate's utter silence.

Whump...whump...

"Jinya-dono."

"Yes?"

"Do you hear that?"

Jinya was so focused on his ruminations that he didn't notice until Naotsugu

pointed it out.

Whump...whump...

The sound came at even intervals.

...Two, home recedes till it's no more.

It was followed by the sound of a counting rhyme being sung. Hearing that, they understood the first sound was that of a bouncing ball.

Naotsugu began to tremble. The singing voice was the same as the voice he heard earlier in his older brother's room. The children's song, youthful and resonant, seemed to call him to the world beyond.

"It seems the master of the estate is inviting us." Jinya joked, grinning as he put his left hand on his scabbard. He put his thumb against the sword guard, ready to loosen it at a moment's notice. The air was tense with the understanding that they would be confronting the demon.

"The sound is coming from the garden," Naotsugu said.

"Shall we?"

They nodded to one another and began to walk. They took a left turn, then proceeded until they reached it—a garden covered in flowers, just like they had seen in their daydream. At the center of the garden stood a man of strong physique and a young girl holding a ball.

"Brother!" Naotsugu's eyes shot wide. He had found his lost older brother. The moment he understood it was him, Naotsugu ran forward.

His head began to dizzy again. The fragrance of flowers overwhelmed him, and he tripped over his legs. His consciousness faded, and it grew harder to move. But he had to keep trying. He was so close.

His vision blurred, and the sight ahead of him turned warm.

"Have you been here long?"

Miura Sadanaga Hyouma knelt on one knee to match the young girl's eye level. In the girl's hands was a ball.

“More than a hundred years.”

“More than a hundred years?! Well, ain’t that quite somethin’.”

The girl seemed no more than five or six. The fact that she could be more than a hundred was hard to believe, but, strangely, he didn’t think she was lying.

“And you’ve been here alone all that time?”

The girl nodded expressionlessly. Her eyes lacked any emotion. She clung for dear life to the ball in her hands, almost desperately so. **“I told you, didn’t I? There’s no going back for me anymore. I’m stuck in this place.”**

Sadanaga had no idea how much time had passed since he’d arrived. He had been drawn here by the counting rhyme. At first he’d been afraid, but he soon grew curious about the singing girl, and time passed him by before he realized it.

The girl spoke little of herself in the beginning. But he persisted in talking with her, and she slowly began to open up. She told him about how she was a demon who had lost her parents, about the secret of this estate, how she had been here alone for over a hundred years, and various other things.

Sadanaga’s arrival in this place had been a coincidence, and he was by no means stuck here. His home was somehow connected to this place, allowing him to wander in. He understood the girl wasn’t at fault and he bore her no ill will.

“You should leave soon. If you stay too long, you’ll lose a place to return to as well.”

The girl wasn’t all that welcoming to Sadanaga. As the lord of the estate, she could easily send him back to the human world whenever she wanted and urged him to return every chance she had. That’s what she claimed, at least. But Sadanaga refused her offers every time and insisted on staying. Even now, he pretended not to hear her and instead thoughtlessly indulged in the flowers. “Oh, these are some nice flowers. I know nothing about flowers, but I can tell these are some nice ones. What do you call this one here?”

The girl’s eyes were devoid of emotion, but when asked something, she would answer. **“...Winter daphne.”**

“Is that right? It’s got a nice bittersweet smell to it. I bet it’d taste pretty good. Darn. I shoulda brought some sugar in with me,” he joked, causing the girl to smile ever so slightly. He smiled back at her and said, “Ah, there we go. You finally smiled.”

He wasn’t stuck in her garden of happiness, but he stayed out of worry for her. If he left, the girl would become alone again, and all that would await her was more loneliness to add to her hundred years of solitude. He hadn’t it in him to leave her to such a fate.

“That’s enough. You should leave.” Perhaps embarrassed to be caught smiling, the girl made herself even more expressionless and insisted yet again that he leave.

Once more, he pretended not to hear her. “I wonder what I’ll do for lunch. Not to brag, but I make a mean bowl of soba. Yeah, soba sounds nice.”

“Listen to me.” She wasn’t letting him off so easily this time. She spoke in a strong tone unthinkable for a young girl, allowing no further tomfoolery. **“You have a family to return to. It’s not worth losing them just because you feel some sympathy for me.”**

“But...”

“I’m fine here in my garden of happiness. I can be with my mother and father here. I’ll be fine without you. If anything...you’re in the way.”

There was a kindness hidden in her words. She was saying this for his sake, and he understood that. She, on the other hand, didn’t seem to understand why he was so obstinate.

A bit exasperated, he let out a soft sigh. This girl understood nothing. What kind of man would leave after being told such a thing? “I think you’re misunderstanding one thing. Home isn’t where family is; wherever your family is, that’s home. If you can’t smile in this place, then it definitely isn’t your home.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you don’t belong here. You understand that yourself already, don’t you?”

“That’s...” The girl went silent.

Feeling he had been too hard on her, he gently patted her head in apology. “All right, how about this: If you leave this place, then I’ll leave too.”

“I can’t.”

“And why is that?”

“I have no home but this garden.”

“Then come live with me. You can live at my family’s home. Wait, maybe it’d be better for us to live alone there. Yeah... How about you become my daughter, then? I’ll leave my home behind, so the two of us can live somewhere else, however we want.”

He felt the idea itself wasn’t bad, but she still refused. **“I can’t leave this place. And I don’t think I could see you as my father.”**

“Aww, rejected. Oh well. Let me know if you ever change your mind.” Sadanaga wasn’t too fond of serious talk, so he spoke jestingly. The girl seemed a bit disappointed, however. Realizing his mistake, he turned his expression stiff and looked her in the eyes. “I’m serious, though. If the day ever comes when you can think of me as a father, then I’ll leave this place with you.”

His earnestness got through to her. After a moment, she said, **“That day will never come,”** and turned away with a huff. Her cheeks were a bit red, though.

He laughed at her little childish gesture and said, “Guess that settles it. I’ll stay with you here forever then.” He then broke into a cheerful smile and—

...He disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“Brother?” Naotsugu called out, but his brother was gone. He struggled to understand what had just occurred.

By the time he and Jinya reached the center of the garden, there was nobody to be found... No. Looking closer, he saw that the girl with the ball was still there, standing stock-still.

“There is nobody left here now, nor anything at all,” the girl muttered to no

one in particular. Her youthful voice was resonant and clear. She looked like a little doll and had red eyes.

“Where is my brother?” Naotsugu asked.

The girl’s eyes darkened slightly at the question. She was clearly the cause of all this. But Naotsugu, with his gentle temperament, didn’t raise a hand against the girl. He only asked again, in a strained voice, “Where is he?”

She still didn’t answer, simply growing gloomier. Unable to bear her silence, he fell to his knees and put his forehead to the ground. “Please, return my brother to me. I beg of you.” It was a dishonorable thing for a samurai to prostrate themselves to another. But he did so regardless, pleading with his shoulders trembling.

Still, she said nothing. In fact, she seemed to be holding back tears herself.

“That’s enough,” Jinya said, unable to watch idly any longer. He reached out and touched Naotsugu’s shoulder, at which the samurai lashed out.

“No! You saw it yourself, didn’t you?! He was here!” Naotsugu couldn’t stop now that he was so close. He was frantic, having finally found a solid lead after so long.

Jinya shook his head and said, “Flowers have specific seasons they bloom in.”

“...What are you talking about?” Naotsugu said, flummoxed.

Jinya continued, ignoring him. What was to follow would pertain to the heart of the incident. He needed Naotsugu to hear these words, whether he liked it or not. “You told me yourself that you found a daffodil in your brother’s room, remember? That was what got me thinking Sadanaga-dono had been brought outside of our world.”

“So what?” Naotsugu yelled, irritated and confused.

Monotone, Jinya said, “Daffodils are a winter flower.”

Time seemed to stop for Naotsugu.

Daffodils were a flower that bloomed from winter to spring. The ones that bloom in spring, however, generally had large petals. The small-petaled daffodils Naotsugu showed Jinya was an early-blooming daffodil, meaning it

bloomed in winter.

“You said your brother went missing in early spring. It’s autumn now...so where could your brother have gotten the daffodil?”

Sadanaga has been missing from early spring to autumn, which meant—by standard logic—there was no way he could have gotten his hands on a small daffodil. But one was unmistakably found in his room, which led to only one conclusion: He had wandered into a world where seasons passed differently than they did in the human world.

“But...my brother was here.”

“Yes. He *was* here.”

“What’re you saying?”

“I had to consider how Sadanaga-dono could have obtained a daffodil. The only possibility that came to mind was that he went to a place created by a demon’s power, one where time passed differently from the human world. I predicted that much. But...look. The flowers blooming now are winter daphne.” He had to let Naotsugu know the truth, no matter how cruel it was. Jinya took up this request fully intent on resolving the incident, but the truth was the incident had already *ended* a long time ago. “My first assumption was that this was a world where daffodils bloomed forever, a place where time had somehow stopped...but I was wrong. Winter daphne signals the start of spring, which means time flows here, just at a different speed than the human world. That’s how Sadanaga obtained a daffodil out of season.”

The problem was, how fast did time pass here? If it was slower, then that was that. But if the girl’s words were to be believed, then nobody, nor anything, was left here now.

Jinya continued, “In all likelihood, in this world—”

“This world moves at a far faster pace than the human world.” The girl finished his words, finally speaking again.

His guess was right. Time passed faster here than outside. There would be no point in looking for Sadanaga anymore.

“What you see here is what was once lost, my younger self’s garden of happiness...” The girl spoke softly, her voice carrying a slight loneliness. **“After a hundred years, I awakened to a power—the power to create the garden of happiness I once had. However...”**

“Oh my. Someone’s full of energy today.”

Suddenly, there were two people sitting out on the veranda.

“I’m watching, I’m watching.”

“She’s gotten better at bouncing that thing, don’t you think?”

They looked like a harmonious couple. But in the next instant, they vanished without a trace, as though they were never there to begin with.

“My power is called *Dreamer*. It allows me to create a miniature world to revisit my memories. But that’s all it can do. It can’t keep things locked inside. It only lets me reminisce on my past.”

In other words, the couple just now, the daydreams from earlier, and the Sadanaga from moments ago were all from her memories. Her power allowed her to reproduce her memories in a way others could see.

She mentioned she couldn’t leave this place, but that wasn’t in the literal, physical sense. Instead, she couldn’t bear to part with her happy memories. Sadanaga hadn’t been trapped in this place; this girl who created it was.

“Time flows faster in this world than on the outside, and those who remain here are slowly forgotten by others. The more precious something is, the easier it is lost. Memories are fated to be washed away with the flow of time and forgotten.” She gazed into the distance with eyes full of sadness. **“Only I remain unable to join the passage of time.”**

Such were the laws of this world. She could relive all her happy memories as much as she wanted in her garden of happiness, but she would have to remain alone. Even if someone did wander in, they would reach the end of their life span long before her and wither away. Her joy-filled days would pass her by again.

“Then, my brother is...?” Naotsugu’s voice trembled. If time flowed faster

here than the outside world, if Sadanaga chose to never leave this place, and if no one was left here now, then—“Is he...?”

The girl looked Naotsugu in the eyes and answered, **“There is nobody left here now.”**

It had all been over from the start. From the moment he started looking for his brother, he had already been long gone.

“That...can’t be.” Naotsugu hung his head weakly.

In that instant, a strong gale began to blow in the once-windless garden.

“Farewell... I’m sorry. I’ve taken your brother from you.”

The wind roared, as though grieving. Flower petals broke off and took to the air. As if swallowed by the sky, the petals rose. Like sand, the whole estate began to lose its form.

“And thank you. It’s thanks to Hyouma that I am free.”

Everything began to fade. The garden of happiness was coming to an end. That much was clear.

“Don’t worry. When you two awake, you’ll be back where you were.” She showed a tenderness unusual for her youthful appearance.

The girl never had any intention of keeping anyone here. Sadanaga wandering in was nothing more than an accident, and she never had any intention of harming Naotsugu and Jinya. Perhaps they were only let in so that she could apologize.

“What will you do now?” Jinya asked calmly as he watched the world collapse around him. He asked out of simple curiosity, wondering what future awaited a girl who gave in to despair and became a demon.

“I’ll go somewhere that isn’t here.” Her resonant, clear voice didn’t carry a hint of its earlier loneliness. **“I have no reason to return to this empty garden of happiness. Not with Hyouma as my father now.”**

“Are you sure? Isn’t this place important to you?”

“It was.” She smiled warmly. **“But I’ve reminisced on the past long enough.**

Hyouma gave up his life to try and give me a place to be, so I've decided to leave this place behind. Because I want to be his daughter."

"I see. You're going to honor your promise with Sadanaga-dono?"

"Yes. That way I can say I'm proud to have that man as my father."

I'm happy now. I've lost much through my life, but I was able to have a second father who loved me very much.

She gave them one last lovely smile before the flowery world dissolved into twilight, and then—

Nothingness.

And so, the garden of happiness came to an end.

...Comes the day all tears will dry; now at last—

Some compared the glow of the evening sky to that of fire. The reddish sky as the sun dipped over the horizon was quite beautiful in its own right, but right now—after waking—Naotsugu was glad it was gone. The gentleness of twilight was much more welcome in this moment than the brilliant orange that recalled flames.

"We're back..." Naotsugu murmured.

They were in the garden. The Miura estate's garden.

It was already dark out. Only a faint red stain was visible in the west where the sun was sinking. Imagining that light as the last embers of a flame dying out, Naotsugu's heart grew a little heavy. "Do you think that girl lived in our home this whole time?"

"That's not quite right. It's better to think of the miniature world she made as a place separate from our own world. I don't know how, but your home was connected with the one over there. Sadanaga-dono crossed over by chance, and..."

"Couldn't leave... Or rather, he chose not to leave."

Naotsugu closed his eyes and saw the girl's warm smile. By sheer chance, she met a man who said he'd be her father. What drove him to remain with her? Naotsugu had no way of knowing. But in the end, the girl was smiling. It seemed she must have been freed from whatever bound her, and the man must have succeeded in his goals.

In a daze, Naotsugu looked out on the garden. "I wonder why my brother decided to stay there." Sadanaga should have understood the girl was a demon and that time flowed differently there. So why did he choose to stay with her even at the cost of his home and family?

Naotsugu's question might not have been anything more than him talking to himself, but Jinya heard it and answered regardless. "Who's to say he had a reason?"

Perhaps Sadanaga felt sympathy for the girl and chose to stay by her side because of that alone, even knowing his fate. Jinya continued, "He might have chosen to stay with her just because. It's not that unbelievable." There were times in his own life, he realized, that simply being by another's side was enough to make him happy.

Naotsugu stayed silent, either not accepting Jinya's answer or just having nothing to say. Jinya followed suit and remained silent, instead looking around at the twilight-lit garden. No flowers bloomed. As it was autumn, any flower here would have long withered. This garden seemed so out of place now, though, since he'd been in a garden full of flowers only moments before. Perhaps this estate he was in was built atop the home that had burned down long ago. The thought made the garden seem even more bleak.

"A long-gone garden of happiness, huh..." he mused.

What was lost was ever more loved in memory. But it couldn't be forgotten that what was lost *remained* lost. No matter how much we wished, it could not return. The girl had lost everything and had given in to despair, becoming a demon, but even then she could only long after lost happiness.

But her life hadn't ended there. Sadanaga wished her to be free, and she took his wish and used it to finally leave the garden of happiness she had trapped herself in.

Something stirred in Jinya's chest. Perhaps it was jealousy. The girl and Sadanaga held a strength that he himself did not have. They were radiant, so much so that he had to avert his eyes to the dim heavens above.

As he watched the sky slowly darken, he wondered where the girl was at this moment. He never did learn her name. He let his mind wander, imagining all the places she could be.

A distant star winked in the sky. Jinya smiled, ever so faintly, at the nearing night.

5

“I HAD A TALK with my mother afterwards.”

The next day, Jinya and Naotsugu met in Kihee, the soba restaurant. Jinya was the one who suggested they meet there again. Naotsugu, who had a job where Jinya did not, had to make time to slip away from Edo Castle midday.

Neither of them ordered anything, content with just sipping tea as they talked. At any other restaurant, they'd be sternly asked to either order something or leave, but both Ofuu and the restaurant owner said nothing of the sort, instead looking at the gloomy Naotsugu with some worry.

“I've long since thought it strange that she didn't remember Sadanaga,” Naotsugu continued. When he mentioned his brother, he seemed to grow even gloomier. “So I tried asking her about him, calmly for once, and learned that she didn't ever really forget him. He was still faintly in her mind. It's just that, to her, Sadanaga left the home more than twenty years ago. She no longer considered him a member of the Miura family, so, by that logic, I was the only son.”

Excommunication wasn't an unusual treatment for a son who left a samurai household and never returned. It could be said that his mother was justified. That didn't make Naotsugu feel better about it, of course. If anything, the righteousness of it only made him more bitter.

He continued, “I get the feeling she felt a similar passage of time my brother had in that other world, perhaps because she so wanted to forget him. The

memory of a son who had left the home was too painful for her.” The memory of him was too much to bear, so it was simply forgotten. That was the true reason why everyone who stayed in that other world was forgotten: Not due to the demon’s power but to human nature.

“It’s scary to think even one’s own family can forget someone if enough time passes. I’m sure even I will one day forget my brother and live like he never existed... Humans are such sad creatures, aren’t we?”

It hurt to live with lost happiness in mind. That was why people easily forgot things that were once dear. In a sense, that girl’s power might have been the very manifestation of that aspect of humanity.

Naotsugu stopped talking, and a silence stretched. In that silence, he seemed to remember something and said, “Oh right, another thing. I had a look through some records in the castle this morning, and it seems there was actually a great fire around the southern samurai residences a long time ago. The fire that girl lost everything in was real.” He pulled out a few memos and began to read from them while explaining. “In year three of the Meireki Era, two hundred years ago, the majority of Edo was burned down in what is known as the Great Fire of Meireki...more popularly known as the Kimono-Sleeve Fire, or the Maruyama Fire. It was a fire unprecedented in its time that burned down almost everything within the outer moat, as well as the castle’s main keep, many feudal lord homes, and half the city area.”

“Come to think of it, the castle’s main keep burned down in that daydream.”

“Right. It’s safe to say what that girl experienced was the Great Fire of Meireki.”

Naotsugu let the memos splay loosely across the table. By conservative counts, at least thirty thousand were thought to have died in the Great Fire of Meireki. The kind of disaster that would break a young girl’s heart. Words alone couldn’t describe the horror of the event, but the two felt they were a little closer to understanding what the girl went through now.

“Reconstruction efforts began after the fire, and the Miura estate was built in the early stages of the process. This is just guesswork of mine, but I have a feeling the land the Miura estate is on...”

“...Is the land that girl lived on before the fire.”

Naotsugu nodded. “You think so too, then? It would explain why my home was connected to her world.”

“It would. It’s quite the coincidence, though.”

“Quite the coincidence indeed. It’d be nice to dress it up and say the two of them were destined to meet, but the fact remains that I’ve lost my brother because of it...”

While he knew it was no real fault of the girl, Naotsugu—and the Miura family as a whole—had lost a family member. Part of him couldn’t forgive her for that. He let out a sigh tinged with sadness.

Naotsugu wasn’t the only one disappointed with this outcome, however. Jinya hadn’t managed to help at all. The incident was over before he even accepted the request. Ashamed of his own uselessness, he bowed his head deeply. “I’m sorry, Miura-dono. I couldn’t do a thing for you.”

Naotsugu’s eyes opened wide in surprise, and he immediately shook his head. “Please, raise your head. The one who should be apologizing here is me.” His voice was surprisingly calm.

Jinya raised his head and met the man’s eyes. There was no blame in his gaze but instead a hint of satisfaction.

Naotsugu continued, “For better or worse, my brother was the sort of man with a strong self-will. It’s for that very reason that he was able to leave his family behind and choose to save that girl. While I can’t quite understand his reasons myself, he did what he truly wanted to and that’s all that matters.” He smiled proudly, like a naive child who knew nothing of the world. Still, his heart got through to Jinya. “Until the very end, my brother remained the man I respected. Just knowing that is enough for me.”

Jinya felt Naotsugu’s determination, as though he had resolved to lead a life worthy of his brother’s memory, one that wouldn’t bring him shame. “It’s about time I head back for work. Take care now.” Naotsugu made for the exit, not ordering a single thing in the end.

Ofuu, who had been silent until now, called out from behind him. “Um,

Miura-dono?”

“Yes?”

“Your brother is a wonderful man. Even if nobody remembers him...the fact he gave everything up to help one girl is incredible.”

A single tear streamed down Naotsugu’s cheek. Even if his brother was forgotten, there was still somebody out in the world who appreciated his deed. Was that not proof that his brother’s choice was right? Without blinking, Naotsugu said, “Indeed. I’m very proud to call him my brother.”

His smile was radiant, much like Sadanaga’s own cheerful smiles.

Naotsugu left Kihee behind, leaving the place to bask in silence. After a moment passed, Ofuu bowed her head deeply. “Thank you for your help, Jinya-kun.”

“Yes, thank you, Jinya-kun. Naotsugu-sama looks like he has a load taken off his shoulders.” The restaurant owner followed his daughter’s example and thanked Jinya.

Unable to accept their gratitude, Jinya curtly replied, “Unfortunately, I didn’t help at all. I couldn’t save anyone, and I didn’t slay any demons.”

“Well, there’s nothing you could do about that, is there?” the restaurant owner said. “At the very least, Naotsugu-sama doesn’t have to look for his brother anymore, thanks to you. Isn’t that plenty enough?”

“I would hope so.”

Naotsugu and the restaurant owner both seemed to have accepted this incident’s conclusion. Jinya, on the other hand, felt that much was still unresolved. Creases formed on his forehead.

“Something on your mind?” the restaurant owner asked.

“...Yes, in fact. I still have some doubts left regarding this incident.”

“Oh, is that so? Like what?”

Seeing the man feign ignorance, Jinya sighed, then made his expression

neutral.

Again, Jinya felt there was much left unresolved about the incident. Until all his doubts were dispelled, things could not truly be called over. Now was the time to unravel the true mystery.

“For example,” he began, “the demon girl we met called Miura-dono’s brother ‘Hyouma’, but I could swear his name was Miura Sadanaga.”

The restaurant owner gave Jinya a look of disbelief, as though appalled that the *ronin* didn’t know about something so obvious. With some exasperation, he said, “Uh, Jinya-kun? I’m pretty sure Hyouma is his *personal name*.”

In the Land of the Rising Sun—as well as in the Qing dynasty—there was a widespread religious belief that one’s true name was bound to one’s soul. From that, it became common to hide one’s true name and adopt a public name for common usage. Sadanaga’s full name was Miura Sadanaga Hyouma—Sadanaga being his formal public name, and Hyouma his personal name.

During this time, it was custom that the only people allowed to call someone by their personal name were the person’s family and lord. It was a serious offense for anyone else to use one’s personal name, as it was believed that knowing a true name was the same as knowing the owner’s true essence, and to speak a true name was to exert control over its owner’s very being. This custom, known as a naming taboo, was found across many regions, not just Japan.

“Really?” Jinya said. “But I thought a samurai’s personal name was only known to their lord?”

“No, no, it’d be weird if the family didn’t know too. The fact that girl called Naotsugu-sama’s brother Hyouma was because he permitted her to, as family. That’s all.”

Those were the words Jinya was waiting for. His eyes suddenly went sharp. “Incidentally, you mentioned before that Miura-dono’s mother often had to scold him for being so engrossed with swords, right?”

“Huh? Um... I guess I did, yeah.”

“Could you remind me how she scolded him?”

“Well, I suppose I...ah.” The restaurant owner finally saw where Jinya’s pointed words were leading.

The exact words he said, as Jinya recalled, were, *Not another word out of you, Arimori!* Back when they were talking about the hair-needle, the restaurant owner had mistakenly used another name for Naotsugu—his personal name, in all likelihood. In the midst of his nostalgia, the restaurant owner had let his guard down.

Completely unfazed, he tried to explain the mistake away. “Oh, that? I was just repeating what I heard from Naotsugu-sama’s mother verbatim. Don’t read too much into it.” His composure came from age, perhaps. Unfortunately, composure alone wouldn’t get him out of this.

“Is that so? I’ve actually met Miura-dono’s mother once. She seemed nice.” Jinya ignored the man’s excuse wholesale to compliment Naotsugu’s mother. The restaurant owner was confused where Jinya was going with this, but Jinya was in fact moments from drawing out the truth. Not that he had any doubt what that truth was after the man’s earlier reaction.

“Uh-huh. Is that right?” the restaurant owner said.

“She was just like her son too—polite and courteous, even to a ronin like me. She watched what she said and always addressed Miura-dono as ‘Naotsugu’ while I was present.”

Panic spread across the restaurant owner’s face, but he knew it was too late. As someone who didn’t care much for his household’s status, he had no idea how his mother acted in front of non-family members.

Jinya continued, “Would you mind telling me how you knew the name Arimori, a name only one’s family and lord should know?”

The man’s fluster was apparent at this point. The nail might as well be in the coffin already.

Still, Jinya continued, not wanting to let the man explain anything away. “Miura-dono believes his brother passed away of old age, but the demon girl only said he was no longer in her world. Demons can’t lie, but they can still hide the truth. Which has me thinking, perhaps the brother was still alive and had

returned to the real world?”

Miura Sadanaga wandered into the demon’s world, spent more than twenty years there, then managed to leave. Meanwhile, in the real world, less than a month had passed. Now suddenly older, Sadanaga had no place to go. If he returned to the Miura estate, his family likely wouldn’t believe he was who he said he was, so instead he went to town. In town, he bought an old building—the money for which he procured either from selling what he had on him or from the demon’s own savings—and began a soba restaurant.

“...That’s my theory at least. If I got anything wrong, feel free to correct me, Miura Sadanaga-dono.”

The restaurant owner knew it was over but tried one final act of desperation. “Time passed faster in the demon’s world, right? Don’t you think Sadanaga-sama might have passed away there long ago?”

“There’s no chance of that,” Jinya said with absolute certainty.

“How can you be so sure?” the restaurant owner asked with genuine interest.

“Because the girl smiled in the end.” He recalled the moment the garden of happiness came to an end. In its final moments, the girl who had lost everything wore a lovely smile. “I can’t imagine Sadanaga-dono is dead. Not when she was able to smile like that.”

Part of her would forever yearn for the past, but that yearning was now overshadowed by something greater. Her smile, full of happiness, was the only clue Jinya needed to figure out that Sadanaga was alive.

“...All right, ya got me. But wow do you play dirty! There’s no way I can keep from giving the game away when you put things like that.” Insisting he wasn’t Sadanaga beyond this point would be the same as denying his daughter’s familial love for him. He threw his hands up in the air in surrender and asked, “Since when did you have me pegged?”

“I had my suspicions from the start, but I only pieced things together after everything was over. There were a number of strange things bothering me, like Miura-dono’s personal name, or this.” Jinya took out the hair-needle he

received from the restaurant owner, who claimed to have received it as a gift from Naotsugu. “It was a bit too strange for a soba restaurant owner to be gifted something specifically meant to be carried on a sword. You received this when you were a samurai, not a restaurant owner. Am I right?”

“Right you are. Arimori had enough of seeing me scratch my head with my hands, so he gave me this.” Samurai were expected to act with decorum at all times, and head scratching was widely considered improper. Scratching your head with a hair-needle—a tool specifically made for head scratching without ruining a topknot—was somewhat less improper, however. This made a hair-needle a perfectly reasonable gift for a samurai. “But, as I’ve said before, I have no use for it anymore.”

Anymore. As in, he had a use for it before he became a humble soba restaurant owner. The man had actually told Jinya a big truth back when he gave away the hair-needle, Jinya just hadn’t noticed.

“Are you not going to tell Miura-dono?” Jinya asked. “He really looked up to you. I’m sure he’d be happy to know you were alive.”

“Listen, Jinya-kun... I’m just some insignificant bloke. I ain’t got it in me to run a household *and* look after my daughter, so I chose what was more important to me of the two. The moment I did so, I lost any right to call myself a man of the Miura family, as well as Arimori’s brother.”

“But still... Is this really for the best?”

“It is. I’m just an owner of a soba restaurant now, and I have no intention of changing that. Besides, Arimori isn’t a child. He can stand on his own two legs without me. You can keep that hair-needle there, by the way. I have no use for it anymore. Feel free to sell it or throw it away if you so want.”

Jinya sighed and put the hair-needle away, prompting an apologetic grin from the restaurant owner. Despite his easygoing attitude, the man could be surprisingly obstinate. But perhaps that should be expected; if he weren’t so unyielding in the first place, he’d never have stayed with that demon girl. At any rate, Jinya could see he wouldn’t change his stance on the matter.

“Still, Arimori doesn’t get *why* I made the choice I did, huh?” The restaurant owner grinned wryly, ruminating over what Naotsugu had said. “Then I guess

he's still got some room to grow. What about you, then? Any guesses why I chose to become the girl's father?" He challenged Jinya with a smirk.

Jinya took a sip of his tea, then answered offhandedly, as though making small talk. "Tough question. Maybe you didn't have a reason at all?" To be more exact, Jinya thought the man stayed with the girl simply because that was what he chose to do and nothing more. The man's steadfastness simply outweighed his family's honor and bonds of blood.

Jinya's throwaway guess evidently hit the mark as the restaurant owner nodded in satisfaction. "Ha ha, you got it! I didn't have any particular reason at all, I just didn't like how lonely the girl was, so I decided to stay with her—and seeing through a decision made, even if nobody understands why you made it, is precisely what it means to be a man."

Even if it meant he wasn't understood, even if it meant he had to abandon all he knew, he couldn't help but stay true to his own way of life. And yet, he bore not a smidgen of regret over that fact, only pride from having achieved his purpose.

He continued, "That said, I guess I don't really expect others to understand my decisions in the first place."

The fact of the matter was that Sadanaga had made a decision, and that decision happened to save the demon girl. Nothing more, nothing less. There was no deeper meaning behind anything.

"Neither do I," Jinya said. "Motives don't exist for others to understand."

"Heh, you get it. You're not long-lived for nothing, my demon friend."

Jinya froze.

He looked at the man with shock, his eyes questioning: *How?*

The man roared with laughter. "When you've lived with a demon for more than twenty years, you can just sort of tell." He grinned wickedly, having one-upped the ronin.

Forcing his stiff body to move again, Jinya donned a guise of calm and sipped his tea. He discretely took some deep breaths before relaxing a little. He cleared

his throat and, to change the topic, asked, “Speaking of which, how’s the girl doing now?”

“Huh?” The restaurant owner scratched his chin as though genuinely confused. “Uh, she’s right here?”

Jinya looked to where the man gestured and saw Ofuu smiling, with the same perfect posture as always. She closed her eyelids, then reopened them to reveal a pair of red pupils.

“...Ah. I did think it was awfully convenient that I could enter the demon girl’s world.”

They got him good, plain and simple. They must’ve seen that Naotsugu was depressed over his brother’s disappearance and realized they could use Jinya to prod him in the right direction. Jinya had been in the palm of their hands from the very start.

“I told you, didn’t I? You’re still just a child to me,” Ofuu said. Seeing Jinya scowl, she giggled. Then she blinked again, and her pupils returned to dark brown.

Jinya knew—firsthand even—that demons stopped aging after they reached a certain point, but the thought that Ofuu might be a demon had never occurred to him for some reason. His head ached as he wondered how he could possibly have been so obtuse.

“I suppose I would be a child to you,” he said. She was around two hundred years old. Compared to her, he was nothing more than a newborn chick who hadn’t even learned to walk. Who could blame her for treating him like one?

“So, what happens now? Are you going to do your job as a demon hunter and hunt me?” she asked with an unworried smile.

Demon hunting was indeed important for Jinya. His younger sister was to bring ruin to humanity in the far future, and he needed power to stop her—specifically, power gained from consuming higher demons. He had only one purpose guiding him now, which left him only one answer he could give here.

“...Just get me a kake soba for now.”

“Right away. One kake, Dad!”

“Got it!”

The restaurant owner replied with pep in his voice, and Ofuu wore a gentle smile like always. Watching them, Jinya’s expression naturally softened. Ofuu’s power was not one suited for combat, so there was no point in consuming her. This logic reeked of poor excuse, but Jinya ignored that fact and went with it anyway.

He let out a self-deprecating sigh. He was as pathetic a man as ever. But just this once, he felt that was okay.

“Hee hee.”

“...What?”

“I’m happy, obviously. It looks like you were wrong after all about your goal being all you had left.” With a smile, she demolished what he’d said to her before. Even her father behind her was smiling. The two were an unconventional pair, perhaps, but they loved one another and were happy despite their strange bond.

“One kake ready.”

“Coming!”

They were not related by blood, nor even both human, but they were still a family. Jinya knew this to be true and was glad for it, even after being tricked to suit their needs. Resting his head on his chin, he gazed out on the abode of happiness before him.

Long ago, there was a girl who lost everything. Her mother. Her father. Her home. The good memories of the places she knew.

Isn’t that girl a demon?

Having fallen to despair and become a demon, she lost even her own self.

But, despite her plight, time cruelly marched on. The flowers withered, the seasons changed hands, and the days—transient like bubbles along a water’s

surface—passed on by. Time waited for no one, and the passage of time brought loss to all.

What was lost was lost, never to return. But one mustn't forget—even if what was lost could never return, that didn't mean something new could not wait on the path ahead.

The demon girl, having left her garden of happiness...

“Here you are, one kake soba.”

...Lived a new life at a soba restaurant in Edo, and smiled as brilliantly as a flower in bloom.

Side Story: The Haunting of Kudanzaka

1

IT WAS NOW YEAR SIX of the Kaei Era (1853 AD), winter.

Zenji took a break at a street-facing teahouse in the Nihonbashi area. It was a rather cold morning, so the hot tea sliding down his throat brought all the more comfort. He couldn't completely relax, however, due to the cloth-wrapped item by his side.

What am I supposed to do with this thing... He looked at the bundle sharing the bench with him, and his shoulders slumped. Under the wrapping was a single ukiyo-e picture, created by woodblock print. Being employed at a shop, he had a fair eye for appraisal. The ukiyo-e picture was your standard mass-produced, multi-color print, but it was of fairly high quality. Even so, he grimaced when he thought of the circumstances surrounding it.

The ukiyo-e picture was wrapped so nobody could see he had it. Its owner had already departed the world, murdered by somebody during a nighttime walk. The incident was no ordinary murder either: The body was left torn to pieces, suggesting the killer was something inhuman. On top of that, the ukiyo-e picture, titled *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*, was found right next to the body, starting rumors that it was a demonic picture and that the man had died from a curse.

How such a troubling item came into Zenji's hands was actually quite simple: The deceased was a regular at Sugaya, so the wife forced it onto Zenji, since she didn't know what to do with it. He wanted to suggest she burn it in her husband's name, but telling a customer what to do was poor form, so he kept his mouth shut and took the ukiyo-e picture.

Seriously, what the heck am I supposed to do with this freaky thing? I'm not some spiritualist or whatever, he grumbled internally as he sighed. He thought long and hard about what his next move would be, then slowly stood up. *All*

right. For now, I think I'll head over to the rice cake shop. He decided to leave the issue to an expert, and for later. His mood lifted some, and in that careless moment he stepped forward and bumped into somebody's shoulder.

"Hey, watch it!" the person said.

Irritated, Zenji bent down to pick up the ukiyo-e picture he dropped. But he was a second too late. "Ah."

By sheer coincidence, the ukiyo-e picture fell under the foot of someone running by and was mercilessly crushed.

Whenever the topic of fathers came up, Jinya couldn't help but think of Motoharu. The memory of his second father challenging that demon with all he had still remained fresh in his mind. Jinya looked up to the man, aloof yet unfaltering in his beliefs. But that didn't mean Jinya disliked his real father. Having come to know loss, Jinya now understood where his father's grief came from. But the fact remained that Jyuuzou was Natsu's father now, not his.

Truth be told, Jinya wasn't quite sure what kind of distance he should take with his father. Even now, as the two faced one another over tea, he didn't know how he should act.

"Please, have a drink before we discuss things."

"Thank you." Jinya sipped from his tea. Between that and the tea snacks, everything was of high quality, as was to be expected for a wealthy home.

He watched his father sip his tea as well and noticed the man had more wrinkles than he remembered. He was keenly reminded of the passage of time. The man's expression was mellower than Jinya remembered as well.

"To get to the point, I have a request to make of you," Jyuuzou began.

Jinya wasn't surprised. He knew Jyuuzou wouldn't have invited him to his room just to drink tea. This would likely be another spirit-related request.

"As someone who works in commerce, I have many connections," Jyuuzou continued. "One of these connections, an owner of a woodblock print shop out in Tenmachou, told me he had stocked a peculiar item—a demonic picture."

He spoke with gravity but showed no disgust at the mention of demons. Jinya couldn't tell whether the man had overcome his past or was simply hiding his emotions. Perhaps he would have known for sure if they had spent more time together.

"The piece is called *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*." Jyuuzou brought out a single ukiyo-e picture. It was a portrait piece depicting a beautiful woman, a common subject, standing with a flowing river behind her. She seemed to be a shrine maiden, adorned with various trinkets, but she held a plain-looking sword in her arms like a mother might a baby. From the vivid colors and refined style, it was clear—even to an amateur's eyes—that this was a fine piece of art. Jinya was less concerned with the art itself, however, and more interested in the depicted woman.

"...Princess Nunakawa? No, not quite..."

"Oh? And who's this Princess Nunakawa?" Jyuuzou raised an eyebrow at Jinya's murmuring. He wasn't asking for clarity but testing Jinya.

Without looking away from the ukiyo-e picture, Jinya answered, "An ancient goddess of jade with ties to rivers. In the province of Shinano, she's considered a goddess of alcohol brewing. This picture is an ordinary portrait piece of a woman, but it can also be interpreted as a picture of Princess Nunakawa. But perhaps I'm wrong, as this sword wouldn't make sense then."

The necklace adorning the shrine maiden's neck appeared to be jade. Paired with the backdrop of a flowing river, the willowy woman seemed to be the Shinano goddess he had heard about some time ago.

"That's quite the specific piece of knowledge to have," Jyuuzou said.

"Yes, well... I heard it from someone else."

"Is that so?"

For his true father's sake, Jinya avoided delving into more specifics, to keep from dredging up memories of that past.

Princess Nunakawa was a goddess of jade. Jade that had her benediction was said to hold the power of immortality and was a much-sought-after item for shrine maidens. She was said to be the ruler of Koshi province, but her legend

was told even in Shinano province. She was also the mother of the god Takeminakata-no-kami, which made her a goddess of safe childbirth in Shinano, on top of her being the goddess of alcohol brewing.

Once, Jinya learned many things about religion from Motoharu. This included knowledge of Princess Nunakawa, particularly tales of her from Shinano. That's why this beautiful shrine maiden, clad in jade with a river behind her, reminded him so much of the goddess. Only the plain-looking sword ruined the comparison.

"You mentioned this was a demonic picture. I take it that's due to some rumors?" Jinya said.

"Yes, but it's nothing serious. The artist who made this picture's initial painting apparently fell sick and is bedridden. He joked that he was receiving divine punishment for selling a demonic picture."

That was the part that caught the interest of the owner of the woodblock print shop, eventually leading him to bring it up to Jyuuzou. How it led to Jyuuzou bringing it up to a strange, demon-hunting ronin was unclear, however.

"What do you think?" Jyuuzou asked.

"Everything seems ordinary enough. This is just a normal ukiyo-e picture," Jinya answered, honestly. He felt bad not having anything more to say after Jyuuzou went through the trouble of calling him over, but there really wasn't anything to add.

"So the artist getting sick was a coincidence?"

"I can't say for sure, as supernatural incidents aren't always obviously apparent. But right now, I see nothing that sticks out as strange."

Jyuuzou looked down and scrutinized the ukiyo-e picture. Despite being called a demonic picture, it only depicted a beautiful woman. Even to him, it looked like nothing more than an ordinary picture.

"I'm guessing you want to request I find out the truth behind this picture?" Jinya asked.

"Yes. It's fine if it's nothing, but if it's something that'll cause problems, I want

you to deal with it.”

“Understood. I’ll take the request.” Jinya took on the job without a second thought. Even if the picture wasn’t a problem now, it could always become one eventually. Supernatural incidents were unpredictable by nature. It was better to be cautious than to be optimistic and suffer for it. Plus, the ukiyo-e picture bothered him.

“Glad to hear it. Of course, you’ll be paid for your troubles.”

“Thank you.”

Jyuuzou nodded solemnly, and the conversation came to an end. From start to finish, their conduct was not familial but like a client and contractor. Jinya found something about that a little sad, but he also felt it was right. Jyuuzou had a new family now, and while Jinya had lost his own, he still had the memories of his second family. It’d be a disgrace to chase after their lost bond now.

“Why don’t we share a drink when the case is settled?” Jyuuzou suggested.

Jinya was grateful for the gesture but also felt a touch of guilt. He accepted the job request not for his real father’s sake but out of personal interest—not because it might involve a “demonic picture” but because it depicted a beautiful shrine maiden wearing a jade necklace.

The scabbard of the sword she held was of a metallic color, and its curve suggested it was a tachi longsword. The only place he knew that made such unembellished tachi blade scabbards out of metal was Kadono.

Winters in Edo were harsh, full of icy winds that made the skin numb and stiff. The people passing by shivered as they hurried down the streets. Jinya mingled among them and glanced at the cloth-wrapped *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* in his hands.

When one heard the word “Kudanzaka,” a particular hill in Iidamachi called “Kudanzaka Hill” came to mind. It had nine stone steps from which it derived its name (which meant “nine-step hill”). An official government mansion called the Kudan Estate also stood on that hill, reinforcing the image. Despite that, not a

single aspect of the ukiyo-e picture resembled any hill in Iidamachi that Jinya knew.

Beyond that, the ukiyo-e picture's main subject—the woman—was notable. The combination of a shrine maiden and a tachi sword in a metal scabbard conjured images of his hometown Kadono. Unfortunately, he couldn't see how that might connect to a Kudanzaka Hill.

He racked his brain as he walked. Just as his fingertips grew completely numb with winter cold, he reached his old standby: Kihee, the soba restaurant.

"Oh, Jinya-kun. Welcome." As always, Ofuu greeted him as he came through the entrance curtains. She had always treated him warmly, but she'd become even more amicable after the incident with the garden of happiness. Come to think of it, perhaps she'd kept watch over him—although she was the waitress to his paying customer—because he was a fellow demon. Amazingly, despite her care, she never crossed any boundaries with him. The distance she kept between them was immensely to Jinya's liking. "Here, drink up. It must be cold outside."

"It is. Thank you." Jinya chose a random seat and was promptly served hot tea the moment he sat down. The girl who once struggled just to carry soba across the room was no more; Ofuu was now a respectable waitress. Business at Kihee was as still as poor as ever, but it seemed she'd found the opportunity to grow despite that.

"The usual kake soba?" she asked.

"Oh, uh..." He'd come to Kihee to look for leads on the ukiyo-e picture, not to eat, but it'd weigh on his conscience if he didn't order anything. It wasn't such a bad deal if he thought of it as a seating charge, he figured. He was about to order when Zenji burst into the restaurant in a panic.

"Is Jinya here?!"

"Zenji-dono?" Jinya said with some surprise.

"Oh, thank goodness! I need your help!"

Jinya didn't often get abrupt, panicked requests like this, but he did receive them, so he was somewhat used to it. But when he heard the details of the

request, his face visibly tensed. He hadn't expected to hear the same name he'd heard from Jyuuzou. "...You said it's called the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*?"

"Yeah. Its owner died under strange circumstances, so people are saying he died of a curse and that this picture is demonic."

"Why is it torn?"

"Right, so... I fumbled it." Zenji explained what happened to the cursed ukiyo-e picture, hiding nothing. It had only been soiled with blood, but then he dropped it and someone stepped on it, leaving it in an even sorrier state. Ever the clumsy man, he was.

The restaurant owner made a face. "Er, you think maybe you could *not* bring cursed things into my restaurant?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't think," Zenji said.

"It's fine, I know you didn't mean to, but please be careful."

Jinya paid the two no mind and reached for the ukiyo-e picture. Despite it being torn, he could still piece together what it had depicted. His eyes narrowed sharply. He pulled out the ukiyo-e picture he received from Jyuuzou and said, "Have a look at this, Zenji-dono."

"Oh?"

"It's a new picture being stocked at a woodblock print shop in Tenmachou, coincidentally of the same name as your picture. I've heard rumor of this being a demonic picture as well."

On the ukiyo-e picture Jinya brought out was a beautiful shrine maiden wearing jade and holding a sword with a river behind her, just like in the ukiyo-e picture Zenji had. Lined up side by side, it was evident the two pictures were a match in both color and composition.

"It's exactly the same," Zenji remarked. "It's pretty high quality for a demonic picture, huh?"

With inquisitive eyes, he carefully examined both. Given his profession, he could recognize and appreciate the ukiyo-e prints' quality—though they were still impressive to a layman's eyes. The figure of the woman was both alluring

and elegant, a testament to the artist's skill. However, it seemed untoward to praise the pieces, what with all the disturbing rumors surrounding them. The multi-color woodblock print style was hugely popular in Edo at the moment, which meant it was likely that quite a number of these prints existed. That Jinya and Zenji had the same print might just be a coincidence, but it was still alarming to consider that it could have something to do with a man's death.

Mirroring Jinya's thoughts, Zenji murmured, "It's kinda worrying to think there might be more of these cursed pictures out there."

"Indeed," Jinya replied, giving Ofuu a sideways glance.

"What a pretty picture," she said, meeting his gaze. The message was clear: She saw nothing wrong with the ukiyo-e pictures either. As far as she could tell, they were just ordinary pieces of art.

"As sad as it is to say, I am not very learned in art. Zenji-dono, can you tell me if there's anything of note here?" Jinya asked.

Zenji looked the ukiyo-e pictures over once more. "Well, uh, they're of the multi-color variety, and the ink is pretty vibrant too. I see no color fading or paper deterioration, so I'd say they were printed less than a year ago. Also, I'm familiar with that Tenmachou woodblock print shop you mentioned. I don't mind accompanying you there to ask who the artist was, if you'd like."

"That'd be a big help."

"It's the least I can do after all you've done for Miss Natsu."

Although he was clumsy and prone to slips of the tongue, Zenji was a good-natured man. He wouldn't make Jinya take on his sudden request without also putting in a little work himself.

The two went to Senkendou Kuzaemon, a wholesale dealer that sold books in Nihonbashi, Tenmachou. The place specialized in books meant for the masses, ranging from novelettes satirizing self-important patrons of red-light district courtesans, to novels of romance between ordinary commoners. But their most popular products by far were their ukiyo-e pictures. In fact, their ukiyo-e pictures were so well made, the place was widely regarded as a woodblock-

print shop instead of the bookstore it actually was.

“Well, if it isn’t Zenji-san! What are you after today?” The owner of Senkendou Kuzaemon called out to Zenji, who was a long-time acquaintance due to his work at Sugaya. “If you’re looking for porn, you’ve come at the right time. We got some good stuff just in.”

“Uh, maybe another time. I’m actually here for something else today,” Zenji said.

Jinya thought it was just like Zenji to have his reason for patronizing this place exposed from the get-go. He waited as the two traded harmless small talk, before getting to the matter at hand.

“Ah, yes, the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*. We no longer sell that one, not with its reputation for being a demonic picture and all,” the shop owner said.

“Is that right? I’ve heard bits and pieces, but isn’t it an overreaction to take it off the shelves just because the artist said a few things?” Zenji asked.

“Well, the artist is actually bedridden, and a patron who bought the picture was killed, so there’s not really anything that can be done about its reputation at this point.”

And just like that, Jinya and Zenji had confirmation that the artist who called *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* a demonic picture was indeed bedridden, as well as confirmation of the death of the man who first owned Zenji’s ukiyo-e picture.

“Oh really? That’s rough. Just out of curiosity...”

Jinya watched with astonishment as Zenji craftily coaxed the information he wanted out of the man without revealing his true intentions. It seemed he was in the merchant trade for good reason, as he drew out the source of the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* with ease.

“The artist? Oh, he lives out in Sakaimachi. Has for a good, long while now, in fact. He’s a bit of an oddball, intentionally living the slum life in a row house.”

Having gotten the information he needed, Zenji brought the conversation to a natural conclusion without arousing suspicion. Jinya could now see why Jyuuzou favored the man—he had talent.

“Looks like the artist’s in Sakaimachi. Think you’ve got it from here?” Zenji asked.

“Yeah. Thanks for the help.” Jinya could never have drawn out such information so smoothly, not with his eternally stony-faced look. His strengths were largely to do with the heavy sword at his hip.

He parted with Zenji and a memory crossed his mind as he walked. While the past was forever out of reach, it sometimes still returned in his thoughts. He remembered a smiling man cheerfully talking about commerce to him.

The roots of Kabuki theater in Edo could be traced back to a shrine maiden from Izumo named Okuni. She took elements of ritual dance and mixed it with elements of noh theater to make Kabuki, a new form of dance theater that was more approachable. It quickly grew popular in Kyoto, eventually reaching Edo and enjoying a boom there. Sadly, the Kabuki dances were thought to break sexual mores and were subsequently banned.

The theater part of Kabuki remained untouched, however. A single troupe from Kyoto set up a theater around Nakabashi, and from there, Kabuki grew big in Edo. Sakaimachi, where Jinya was now headed, once bustled with many theaters. But after the Tempō Reforms moved the theaters to Asakusa, Sakaimachi fell into decline. To top things off, there was a foreboding rumor going around, the cause of many somber faces on the streets.

From what Jinya overheard, the murdered man who owned a copy of *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* was killed in Sakaimachi—which happened to be the very place the bedridden artist of the demonic picture lived. No wonder the woodblock-print shop’s owner no longer stocked the ukiyo-e picture in his store. Such a coincidence was uncanny. For Jinya, however, such a suspicious coincidence was very welcome. It meant he was on the right track.

He walked the quiet streets of Sakaimachi until he reached an out-of-the-way back-alley row house. The place was squalid and, unlike the rest of Sakaimachi, full of the sounds of activity. It was not a place that got many visitors, as evidenced by the reaction from the handful of women gossiping by the well, who kept stealing glances at him and whispering amongst themselves.

“Excuse me, is this the room of Saga Doshu-dono?” Jinya asked as he got to a door.

Saga Doshu was the name of the artist who made the original art for *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*. He, the creator of the demon picture, was supposedly bedridden. Whether that was due to a curse was still unknown, but Jinya hoped to at least learn more about the ukiyo-e picture in question.

“That’s me. Go on ahead and let yourself in.” The response from inside had more vigor than Jinya expected. He peered in and saw a thin old man sluggishly propping himself up on his bed. “Now, who might you be?”

“My name is Jinya. Please pardon my unannounced visit, Saga-dono.”

“Oh, you needn’t be so humble with me. Please, sit.”

Jinya did just that, then looked around. He saw dozens of brushes and paint palettes, dyes, glues, and much more. All of them were gathered in one corner of the room, and it looked like they hadn’t been used in a while. It did seem like the artist had been too sick to work.

“Sorry I’m not in a more, uh, *presentable* state. As you seem to know, I am an ukiyo-e artist operating under the name Saga Doshu. Though I’m just another stubborn old man, now that I can’t hold a brush.” Doshu introduced himself from his bed with a smile. He was a thin man with a deeply wrinkled face. “Don’t think I’ve seen your face before. What business might you have with this old coot?”

“There are some things I want to ask you. Could I trouble you for some of your time?”

“But of course. I can’t serve you tea or anything, but your presence is welcome. Been a while since I’ve had a visitor.”

Jinya had thought a man so dedicated to his craft would be stubborn and eccentric, but Doshu was quite mellow despite his age, even treating a youngster like himself with kindness. The old man must’ve been quite the charismatic personality when he was younger.

Jinya began, “I heard you were suffering from an illness.”

“Oh, nothing of the sort. This is just old age. Sadly, my body can’t draw like it used to anymore.”

That was not what Jinya had heard at the woodblock-print shop. Now that he considered it, Doshu’s complexion wasn’t all that poor, and his speech was fairly clear. He was just a little thin, that was all. It was a bit hard to imagine the old man had been cursed. Jinya asked, “So it’s not the demonic picture’s curse?”

“Oh, you’re an errand boy from Senkendou, Sour Face?”

So it was true that the artist had told the woodblock-print shop that he was receiving divine punishment for selling a demonic picture, but there was a slight disconnect. He pulled out his copy of *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*. “No, but I heard you drew this.”

“*Kudanzaka*... Now that brings back memories.”

That was a strange thing to say, Jinya thought. According to Zenji’s appraisal, the ukiyo-e picture had been printed less than a year ago, but Doshu looked at the picture with a mixture of nostalgia and surprise, as though having chanced upon a very dear, lost item. Jinya said, “Senkendou Kuzaemon seems to have taken what you said about this being a demonic picture to heart. I’m trying to look into the circumstances around it.”

Doshu stared at the ukiyo-e picture a bit longer as though he hadn’t heard Jinya. Eventually he looked at Yarai on Jinya’s hip, then finally at Jinya’s face. He heaved a heavy sigh. Jinya felt no ill will from the old man, but he couldn’t read him otherwise. “I see,” Doshu said.

“Would you be willing to tell me about this picture?”

“Oh, sure, I don’t mind. I can’t say I have the answers you’re after, but it’s clear that sword of yours brought us together.”

Jinya was grateful that the old man was willing, but that last bit confused him. Rather than elaborating, however, the old man just went on.

“Hm, where do I start... All right, how about the piece’s name, *Kudanzaka*. This has nothing to do with the Kudanzaka Hill in Edo but refers to the woman herself.”

“So it’s her name?”

“No, not quite. A man named Motoharu simply chose to call her that.”

Jinya was stunned. He hadn’t expected to hear that name here.

The old man smiled. “That sword at your hip is a Kadono blade, right? There used to be another man with a similar sword that’d visit me from time to time. Ah, you’ve got me all caught up in reminiscing now.”

2

ENDINGS ALWAYS arrive too suddenly. Jinya—*Jinta* learned this cruel fact of the world long ago, when Motoharu died.

“I couldn’t even protect the woman I love... Damn it. I’m so pathetic.”

The demon that had attacked Kadono was enormous. Even on all fours, it towered too high for any man to reach. Its muscles were not bound by skin, and it drooled saliva. Its red, wild eyes scanned the area, looking for prey.

It had attacked the shrine without warning and eaten Yokaze, the village shrine maiden. Still ravenous, it ran wild in the village, where it came across Jinta and Shirayuki, next in line to be shrine maiden. The two of them tried to flee, but their little legs couldn’t outrun a demon. The hand of death reached out, but just before it could close over them, Motoharu saved them.

“No, Kaede. I’ll be dying in your place this time.”

He wasn’t his usual, aloof self in that moment. He charged forth, boldly defending Jinya and the unconscious Shirayuki behind him. But all hope was soon crushed. The demon was strong, too strong even for the village’s strongest swordsman to handle. It swiped its claws once, which Motoharu could not dodge, and blood danced in the air. He fell to the ground without even closing the distance. This was no fight but a slaughter.

Despite his injuries, Motoharu smiled as though he felt no pain. “Yokaze...you always told me I was the wrong man to be your shrine-maiden guardian. Perhaps you were right. Maybe I’m not fit to be your guardian or your

husband.”

The situation looked hopeless. The demon watched Motoharu, unfazed, seeing no threat as he limped closer.

“But I regret nothing. I don’t know if it was for better or worse, but meeting you changed me. Being a shrine-maiden guardian wasn’t all smooth sailing, but I got to be with you. This life wasn’t bad, really. ...Was it the same for you? In the end, I never did get to ask, did I?”

He stopped and braced himself.

“Y’know, Jinta...”

Strength returned to him, as though to declare this coming strike would end things. Intuitively, the young boy understood: These would be his second father’s final words.

“I actually hated Yokaze at first.”

He smiled with exasperation. The mood lightened just a little.

“I was fine with being chosen as the shrine-maiden guardian, but I just couldn’t stand how unreadable she was. I couldn’t help but wonder if I was seriously going to take this emotionless, know-it-all woman as my wife.”

The demon simply watched. Its eyes held no glimmer of interest or focus. It growled but showed no sign of attacking.

“But eventually, I came to want to protect her. ...I really did. But something changed in me, and that desire faded. People are like that. No, not just people. Everything is like that. Everything can change with time: the seasons, the sights, the days we take for granted, and even our hearts that have sworn eternal vows. No matter how sad or painful a truth it may be, inevitable change remains.”

His self-deprecating tone hurt Jinta. But the one truly hurt by those words was likely Motoharu himself.

“I hated change, though. I hated how the world shifted around me and was afraid I’d one day simply accept how I’d changed, so I pretended nothing was wrong. I’ve been wishing for a long time now that things would never change,

but...”

The man looked over his shoulder at Jinta.

“Don’t end up like me, kid.”

He smiled weakly, full of resignation.

“Nothing that exists is changeless. Even the most precious of feelings change shape. Perhaps they grow more precious, and perhaps they grow so hideous you can’t stand to see them anymore. I couldn’t accept that truth, and this is where it got me.”

After a pause, he resumed in a softer tone.

“Jinta. Become a man who can cherish his hatred.”

Jinta didn’t understand the meaning behind those words. Seeing his confusion, Motoharu beamed.

“You don’t have to understand what that means yet. Just remember the nonsense this foolish man prattled on about from time to time, once you become an adult.”

Having said his piece, he looked back at the demon and raised his sword.

“The rest is in your hands, Jinta. Take care of Shirayuki and keep close to Suzune.”

The air around him changed. His body came to life as he sprung forth and—

That was all Jinta remembered, as he lost consciousness then. Later, he learned that Motoharu succeeded in killing the demon at the cost of his own life. He died leaving behind a strange final request for Jinta, and without a chance to say farewell to his daughter.

Endings always arrive too suddenly. The children’s days of blissful innocence came to a close like they never existed in the first place.

Without understanding Motoharu’s final request, one of the children, Jinta, went on to give in to his hatred and become a demon. He practically fled his hometown and returned to Edo. Never did he expect to hear his second father’s

name there.

“Excuse me, could you tell me more about Motoharu? I actually come from Kadono. Motoharu is my adoptive father.”

Doshu’s eyes grew wide with surprise, then just as quickly narrowed with nostalgia. “I see, I see, so you’re his son. How strange it is that fate would bring us together. I’ll tell you about him if you’d like. Although, I would have regardless, as there’s no explaining *Kudanzaka* without discussing him.”

Perhaps it shouldn’t have surprised Jinya that Doshu knew Motoharu. He had already suspected Kadono was involved somehow, when he saw the shrine maiden holding a tachi sword in the ukiyo-e picture: reminiscent of Itsukihime, the shrine maiden of Mahiru-sama. His gaze nonetheless grew sharp at the mention of his second father.

Doshu continued, “Back when I was still a young’un, there was this mysterious woman that lived in this rowhouse here. I never learned her name ’cause she never gave it, but she swore to never lie to make up for that. We called her Noname.”

His tone was warm. It was clear he treasured these memories. Jinya still couldn’t see how this story would come to involve something so ominous as a “demonic picture,” but he listened on.

“Noname was terribly beautiful. Her skin was spotless, and her black hair lustrous—not the kind of looks someone living in a dingy rowhouse would have. I was still young then, so my heart raced every time she passed by.” He glanced at Jinya with a grin. With some exaggeration, he added, “Every now and then, Motoharu would come *all* the way from Kadono to visit her.”

It was obvious the old man was just teasing Jinya, so he didn’t react. Doshu pouted when he saw he wasn’t getting a rise out of him. “Aw, you’re no fun.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Yes, well, Motoharu didn’t visit for romantic reasons. He had apparently been appointed to some prominent position in his village, something to do with guarding the shrine maiden, and would come to Edo to visit Noname under his shrine maiden’s orders.”

Come to think of it, Jinya had first met Motoharu near Edo. Edo and Kadono were more than a month's travel apart, and twice that for a round-trip. During that entire time, the village would be without its shrine-maiden guardian. What reason could there be for Motoharu to make such a trip under Yokaze's orders?

"How do you know all that, Saga-dono?" Jinya asked.

"Oh, Motoharu was no stranger. We chatted over drinks all the time. Despite his aloofness, he actually had a number of troubles he loved to share."

It was clear by now that Doshu and Motoharu had been friends. How strange it was indeed, that fate would bring Jinya and him together.

"He used to complain about being sent here, I remember. It seemed he didn't have a problem with meeting Noname, but he didn't like being ordered around by his 'slave-driver' of a shrine maiden."

"Really? I thought the two got along..."

"Well, you're his kid. He probably avoided the topic around you."

Jinya could imagine his second father grumbling about his problems. But about Yokaze? Surely not... The man had mentioned he hated her at one time, but actually hearing about their strained relationship felt strange.

Doshu deftly picked up on his surprise and smiled, amused. "I don't know what Motoharu and Noname talked about. Perhaps it had something to do with his position. Didn't care, didn't ask. At any rate, he came once a year to this rowhouse. That is, until Noname one day left Edo, after which he stopped coming. It's now been twenty years since we last met." The old man nostalgically closed his eyes, perhaps recalling his younger days. With an expression Jinya couldn't quite place, the man sighed. "I was shocked enough to hear he had a kid with that shrine maiden he was always complaining about, and now I'm face-to-face with his adopted son. Good grief. What a man."

Jinya could tell the man was fond of Motoharu despite his harsh words. He couldn't quite hide his smile.

"Anyway, we were talking about *Kudanzaka*, weren't we? Well, *Kudanzaka* is an original painting I made back when Noname was still here. I don't know how, but Senkendou heard about it and told me they wanted to stock it. So I re-

painted it, and they made a woodblock print from that, which is where all the prints in circulation come from.”

In other words, all the copies of *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* were recently mass-produced versions of an older work. Did that mean the original was the inauspicious demonic picture of rumor then? Perhaps not, judging from Doshu’s relaxed manner.

“So the woman in the picture is Noname?” Jinya asked.

“You could say so. But you’d be just as right to say she isn’t. The woman in this picture only exists in my mind, born from Noname’s appearance, Motoharu’s direction, and given shape by me. That’s all the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* is. Oh, the original is no longer with me—I gave it away, to Motoharu.”

“I see... You said *Kudanzaka* was a demonic picture, though. Why?” The more Jinya heard, the less he understood about the whole matter. With a slight frown, he looked into the old man’s eyes and saw his earlier ease was gone.

In a grave tone, Doshu said, “That’s because it *is* a demonic picture. The truth of its nature will haunt you for all eternity. Before I get to that, however, let me ask you one thing: What was your impression of the picture?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just want to hear your thoughts, anything is fine. Tell me what went through your mind.”

“Well, I thought it was a very standard picture of a beautiful woman, a common subject for an ukiyo-e. The river, the shrine maiden, and the jade made me think of Princess Nunakawa of Shinano legend at first, but the tachi blade in her arms made me then think she might be Kadono’s Itsukihime.”

“Oho, I see, I see.” Doshu bobbed his head with satisfaction. Jinya still couldn’t figure out what the old man was after, but he felt like he was being tested from the way he grinned slightly. “All right, it’s time I explain why I called it a demonic picture. But let me warn you: You will most likely regret asking to know. Do you still want to?”

Need he even ask? Jinya had his request from Jyuuzou to consider, as well as

the knowledge that this had something to do with Motoharu. He wouldn't back down.

Seeing that Jinya was ready, Doshu smiled again with satisfaction. "Come back tomorrow, then. I need to look for something first. It should still be around here, I reckon."

And thus, the conversation ended with the truth postponed until the next day.

Days in winter were short. The sky was already a light indigo when Jinya stepped out, and the frigid wind sapped his body's heat. He left the rowhouse behind as though fleeing and headed back to Fukagawa.

He still looked up to Motoharu. Even with the passage of years, and with the loss of his humanity, Jinya couldn't forget the sight of his second father bravely facing that demon. He still longed to be like him. That was why he didn't want to believe that Motoharu could have anything to do with a curse. He didn't even want to consider the possibility that the origin of the curse itself could be...

"...I'm still so pathetic."

The words slipped out of his mouth before he knew it. Even after so many years of seeking strength, he was weak, and that knowledge dejected him.

The streets of the once-prosperous Sakaimachi were dark, and the light of shops distant. But that was fine, for he felt like walking in darkness tonight.

3

NOTHING THAT EXISTS is changeless. Motoharu had taught Jinya that long ago. As though in spite of those words, however, Jinya's gloom remained, even after a full night's rest.

Jinya lived in a dingy rowhouse in Fukagawa. The place was nothing more than a place to sleep, so his room only had the bare minimum of living necessities and some alcohol. He washed his face at the nearby well, quickly dressed, and then made for Sakaimachi again. His body felt a bit sluggish, either

the fault of bad sleep or his gloomy mood.

“Oh my, Jinya-kun?”

A little past noon, he happened across two girls he knew, Ofuu and Natsu. It wasn't unusual to see the two together, but this certainly was an unexpected time to run into them.

“What are you two doing here?” he asked.

“We decided to go window shopping together.”

Ofuu explained that her father had urged her to do something other than work for once. Natsu, who happened to be around, brought up the idea of the two of them going window shopping.

“I was thinking we could go see a play at first, but we ended up deciding to keep things in the area. After we take a break at this teahouse, we'll probably go check out some hairpins and combs, then some books and ukiyo-e pictures. What do you have going on today?” Natsu asked.

“The usual.” Jinya tapped the sword at his hip.

“Speaking of which, you were looking into an ukiyo-e picture this time, weren't you?” Ofuu said.

“...Yeah.”

She cocked her head at his stiff reply. The girls gave him worried looks, making him a bit uncomfortable.

“Did something happen?” Ofuu asked.

“Well...I found out my adoptive father might be involved in the incident I'm looking into, and I'm not quite sure how to feel about that.” Grateful for their concern, he decided to reveal a little of what was going on.

The girls' expressions darkened. While their situations were slightly different, they both had adoptive fathers too, so they understood how worrisome this was.

“I'm sorry, was it rude of me to ask?” Ofuu said.

“Not at all. There's nothing confirmed yet, just a possibility.” This was indeed

hard for Jinya to talk about, but there was also nothing to be done about the past. He put on an air of indifference to make it seem like he didn't mind.

His act seemed to work; Natsu showed no worry as she asked, "What kind of man was your father?"

He smiled slightly at the irony of talking about his "father" with Natsu. "He was an aloof man; I never once saw him worry about anything. He was the guardian of my village's shrine maiden and was its strongest swordsman, perhaps ever."

Jinya felt proud talking about Motoharu as his father, but at the same time he felt a little guilty. Perhaps that was how it should be. As someone who had turned his back on family, Jinya had no right to feel guilt-free when referring to Motoharu as his father.

"I'm sure things will be fine then." Ofuu let out a warm sigh. Perhaps she saw Jinya's internal turmoil, or perhaps she did not. Not understanding what she meant, Jinya raised a brow. She gave him her usual brilliant smile. "Your father must be a good man if you can speak of him so proudly. Even if he has something to do with the incident you're looking into, I'm sure he couldn't have done anything bad."

She spoke with certainty despite a lack of proof. But her words were convincing regardless. "...You think so?" he asked.

"I do," she said with a smile as beautiful as a flower.

He felt the doubts he held melt away.

"Anyway, I'm sure you're busy. Don't let us keep you any longer," she said.

"Oh..." He wanted to thank her but couldn't find the right words. She smiled like she found the sight of him hemming and hawing heartwarming.

"Heh heh, how unusual. It's not every day you share something about yourself," Natsu remarked. This was indeed unusual for him, but he was thankful that he had run into them. "Later then, Jinya."

"Please tell us some more about yourself next time," Ofuu said.

The conversation came to its natural end, and the two left after a short

farewell. Jinya stood by the roadside for a moment, then continued onward to Sakaimachi again. The sluggishness in his body was gone.

Jinya reached Sakaimachi, then the rowhouse where Saga Doshu lived. He entered the old man's room and found that Doshu had freshened himself up a little.

"Sorry you had to make the trip here a second time."

"I don't mind. It's only right when you're helping me so much."

"You're too kind. In any case, I managed to prepare everything while you were away."

Similarly, Jinya himself was prepared to hear the truth now. Doshu saw the tension in Jinya's face and nodded solemnly. The air grew heavy. What would follow would be a serious matter. "Let me tell you of that picture's curse now. Relax a little, though. This is nothing more than an old man's reminiscing, really."

The old man began to recount his memories of the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*.

It was an old story now.

A younger Saga Doshu lived in this rowhouse with hopes of becoming Edo's leading artist, despite not being affiliated with any of the famous schools. In other words: He was a penniless dreamer. He lived a life of poverty, his only good meals coming from his generous neighbors. Life in a rowhouse was basically communal, so he got to know his neighbors rather well and took care to maintain good relations with them.

"Whew, yet another day of hard work. How's the art coming along?"

The one who treated him best in the rowhouse was a woman simply called "Noname." She said that she couldn't give her name but would never lie. Noname was, to put it bluntly, a jewel in a dunghill. Even with her shabby kimono, she was a beauty that didn't belong in a dingy rowhouse like his. She spoke crassly, sometimes addressing people as, "Hey, you," and even swore like

a man, but that contrast only made her beauty stand out more. Young Doshu's heart raced whenever he talked to her.

"I am Motoharu, shrine-maiden guardian. Under Itsukihime's orders, I bring you this letter."

A man named Motoharu came from a distant village called Kadono to see Noname. She was elated to meet him, something that made Doshu deeply jealous at the time. His jealousy didn't last long, however.

"Goddamn it, why the hell is a shrine-maiden guardian like me being made to do courier work?! What is with that woman?!"

Motoharu was furious; he'd just been assigned a highly regarded position, only to be immediately sent out of his hometown for months to act as a messenger. Doshu happened to overhear the man complaining, and that led to a long friendship between the two.

Motoharu did not yearn for Noname, but he had no problem with her either. He would come to Edo to deliver his message as his duty required, after which he'd air his grievances to Doshu, then return to his hometown. That cycle continued for a long time.

Precious memories like these never fade, even with time. When Doshu closed his eyes, he could still see the boisterous days of his youth that he spent painting.

"In time," Doshu continued, "Motoharu's attitude towards his shrine maiden changed. He had a lot going on that I didn't know about, I imagine, but he was still a good-natured guy who couldn't hold a grudge." He returned to being the old man he was, eyes narrowed in nostalgia. His expression went serious, however, signaling he was getting to the matter at hand. "That was around the time he asked me to draw a picture..."

Specifically, the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*, the one born from Noname's appearance, Motoharu's direction, and given shape by Doshu.

In other words, *Motoharu wanted a picture of Noname*. Jinya tensed slightly at this information.

Doshu continued, “Now, apparently Noname was born in the province of Shinano but had some problems there and fled to a mountain village in the province Harima. One you know quite well, actually: Kadono.”

Jinya had braced himself for the truth, but it seemed the old man was veering off topic again. Growing frustrated, his gaze turned a little harsh as he asked, “I’m sorry, but what of the picture?”

“I’ll get to that, don’t worry. This is important too.”

The connection surprised him, but Jinya wanted to hear more about the demonic picture right now. However, the old man didn’t budge and continued reminiscing.

“Noname eventually left Kadono and came to live in Edo. Now, I assume Motoharu was sent to Edo to act as his shrine maiden’s proxy because she couldn’t leave the village herself, but I don’t know that for sure.”

Jinya couldn’t care less about these details. His impatience was growing, when suddenly—as though waiting for this moment in his story—Doshu met his eyes directly.

“But get this: Perhaps by some strange twist of fate, Noname and this shrine maiden looked exactly the same. At least, according to Motoharu.”

Finally, Jinya saw where the man was going with his rambling. If Noname and Yokaze resembled one another, then Motoharu’s asking for a picture of Noname took on a wholly different meaning. Now understanding, Jinya said, “You mean to say *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* is actually a picture of Yokaze-san, the shrine maiden?”

“That’s exactly it. Despite all his complaining, he really ended up head-over-heels for her. Now, he wanted me to draw a picture of his shrine maiden, right? But there was no way I’d know what she looked like. That’s why I used Noname as a reference, since she looked like the shrine maiden, alongside Motoharu’s suggestions and my own imagination. That’s the secret behind *Kudanzaka*.”

In that case, Jinya’s initial impression wasn’t far off the mark. The pictured woman wasn’t Princess Nunakawa but Itsukihime with the Modori River as a backdrop. The sword in her arms must be Yarai, passed down through

generations of shrine maidens, and any differences in appearance were due to the art being guesswork on Doshu's part.

"But why did you call it a demonic picture?"

"That's because back when I first knew him, Motoharu used to say his shrine maiden was more of a demon than any real demon. I called *Kudanzaka* a demonic picture to tease him about that...at first, anyway. After painting it for Senkendou out of nostalgia, my age started to catch up with me. Sometimes I wonder, maybe it really is a demonic picture, and I'm being cursed for selling somebody's feelings for profit..."

When Doshu had half-jokingly, half-regretfully told the woodblock-print store the ukiyo-e picture was a demonic picture, they took it at face value because they didn't know the full story. They genuinely thought the ukiyo-e picture was cursed and had made him sick. The mysterious murder only added credibility to the moniker.

"That's all there is to it, really. This talk of someone dying is, in all likelihood, just an unfortunate coincidence. There's nothing particularly frightening about the picture."

And that was that. The incident, in its entirety, had been resolved. The *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* posed no threat to anyone and, barring one old man's misgivings, was completely fine to sell.

"If that's the truth, then why'd you say I'd regret asking to know?" Jinya asked. Doshu made it sound like Jinya was better off not knowing the truth behind the ukiyo-e picture, but the truth wound up being nothing more than some nostalgic story. What had all that talk about the truth coming to haunt him been about?

"*Kudanzaka's* a real beauty, ain't she?" Doshu said with a smirk.

"I suppose."

"Heh, that's all because Motoharu was nagging my ear off the whole time I drew, telling me this and that were wrong or that I wasn't capturing enough of his shrine maiden's charm. So fussy, that man. Anyhow, my point is that *Kudanzaka* is Motoharu's shrine maiden, as she was beautified in his mind."

“...Huh?” To Jinya, Motoharu was a kind man who took him and his sister in, as well as a hero who fought with a demon with the last of his life. He was not a no-nonsense person, but discovering he could also be childish made Jinya feel a bit embarrassed.

“Oh, but it gets even better. You said the woman on *Kudanzaka* looked like Princess Nunakawa, but Motoharu thought a bit differently. He said she looked like Yasakatome-no-kami. Are you familiar with that one?”

“I am.” When he was young, Jinya learned many things of a religious nature from Motoharu. Yasakatome-no-kami was a goddess from Suwa, in Shinano province. Her origins were unclear, but she was the wife of Takeminakata-no-kami. This made Princess Nunakawa her stepmother, so the two were sometimes worshipped together. Perhaps Motoharu got the idea in his head because Noname was from Shinano and looked like Yokaze. What a coincidence it was for Jinya to compare the pictured woman to a goddess, just as his second father had.

“Good, that’ll make my explanation easier. So, I finish the painting, and Motoharu looks so happy with it that I let him name it. First he suggests ‘Yasaka,’ short for Yasakatome-no-kami, but quickly changes his mind.” Doshu broke into a wide grin, as though about to burst into laughter. “Without an ounce of shame, he says, ‘My wife’s more beautiful than a goddess. Yasaka—eight hill—ain’t enough to do her justice. Her beauty is a *full step higher*, so we’ll call it Kudanzaka—nine-step hill!”

It was at this moment that Jinya understood Doshu had been right. He *would* regret learning the truth.

The old man’s laughter echoed off the walls of the room. “I told you, didn’t I? You were better off not knowing! The *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* is nothing more than your father boasting about his wife!”

Embarrassed beyond belief, Jinya buried his face in his hands. Now he understood why Doshu had said the truth would haunt him. There was nothing more haunting than hearing about one’s parent acting like a lovestruck buffoon. His second father had been so smitten that he proclaimed Yokaze more beautiful than a goddess, for crying out loud. Jinya wanted to crawl into a hole.

To make matters worse, he wasn't learning of this in Kadono but in Edo of all places.

"While we're at it, I can't help but notice you've been saying *Kudanzaka* like it's nothing. Could you still do that, now that you know you're basically saying, 'My mother's more beautiful than a goddess'?"

He hadn't thought of that, but now that it had been pointed out... Jinya hung his head in defeat. Even saying the name of the ukiyo-e picture would be humiliating. In a sense, that made the ukiyo-e picture more cursed than any actually cursed item could be. He felt like an utter fool for having been so depressed when such an embarrassing truth was all that awaited him.

"Ha ha, I finally broke through that sour face of yours. Ah, what a laugh this was!" Doshu was all smiles, reveling in Jinya's broken state. This was his revenge for Jinya's lack of reaction when he'd teased him about Motoharu coming to meet Noname.

When he was done laughing, Doshu said, "Anyway, since Motoharu didn't tell you about *Kudanzaka*, I figured I'd fish this out to show you." He pulled out an ukiyo-e painting. It was uncolored, but its composition was familiar. It was without a doubt *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*.

"This is..."

"A sketch I made at the time, yes. A bit dirty now, but don't mind that."

According to Doshu, he kept it because he couldn't bear to throw it away. It was one of his better practice paintings. The paper was old and a little dirty, and the brush strokes were a pale shadow of the woodblock-print version that was sold. Despite that, Jinya felt a certain warmth towards it.

"Now, I know I'm the one who told you all this stuff, but don't go holding anything against your old man. He may be a simpleton, but he's a simpleton who loves his family. He started visiting Edo less once his daughter was born, and after he adopted two new kids, he visited once and then no more."

Jinya felt a warmth in his chest that was not embarrassment. Motoharu's visits to Edo were part of his duty as shrine-maiden guardian, meaning it was likely Yokaze who ordered him to stop making the trips. Nonetheless, Jinya was

happy to hear his father praised. There was no doubt in his mind that Motoharu loved his daughter, as well as Suzune and Jinya himself.

“Yes, he was a good father. He always made time to teach me valuable lessons,” he said. Jinya still couldn’t make sense of all Motoharu wanted to convey to him, even now. But his chest swelled with pride. Even if they weren’t related by blood, the man was without a doubt his father.

“I see, I see.” Doshu smiled softly with delight—as though recognizing that the man before him was indeed his friend’s son.

And so, the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* incident ended without any real complications. Doshu offered to give the original sketch away, but Jinya politely refused. The old man had many memories tied to it. Jinya wouldn’t dare deprive him of it.

The multi-color woodblock print copies were kept off the market for a time, but no further problems occurred. The one death proved to be nothing more than an unfortunate coincidence. The ukiyo-e pictures themselves were not cursed.

All that was left to do for Jinya was report back to Jyuuzou.

“Here you are, one kake soba.”

Before that, Jinya stopped by Kihee for a meal. He needed some time to process his thoughts. The fact that the *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka* was nothing more than his second father bragging about his wife came as a shock, but it was not one Jinya could possibly share with his true father. Jinya was, to put it plainly, stumped.

“Something up, Jinya-kun? You’ve been staring at me for a while now,” the restaurant owner said.

Jinya hadn’t realized that was what he’d been doing. The man and his daughter were both looking curiously at him. “Nothing... I was just thinking about how good a father you are.”

Ofuu smiled broadly. “Where did that come from?”

Jinya meant it. The restaurant owner gave up half his life without a single complaint and still treated his daughter lovingly every day. Jinya himself didn't have that kind of strength, so he respected the man for it. Right now, however, he was extra conscious of that fact for another reason.

"Did something happen with that ukiyo-e picture you were looking into?" Ofuu asked. "I remember you mentioned that your father was involved."

"That ended up being nothing, really. Just a side of my father that I wish I didn't know. I still respect him though. Somehow." Jinya was evasive with his answer, still not quite able to accept the truth behind *Ukiyo-e of Kudanzaka*. Now that he'd had time to think about it, he realized that the ukiyo-e picture being so popular in Edo meant that many people had proof of his second father's embarrassing deed. That would haunt him even more than when he thought his father was involved with a potential curse.

"He's not perfect, you know?" Ofuu said with a smile.

Jinya raised his head to look at her, confused as to what she was getting at.

Softly, as though humming a lullaby, she said, "My dad. You only see his good side so you've never realized, but my dad is actually a nagging worrywart who can be unbelievably silly at times."

"Ouch. You're sure not holding back," the restaurant owner said.

"Well, it's true, isn't it? Of course, there's so much more to you than that."

"Oh, is that right? Ehe heh."

That she could insult her father like this was proof of their closeness. Her words felt much more sincere with the knowledge of their past in mind.

Of course, Jinya was still proud of his bond with Motoharu, and it would never be outdone by the bond between Ofuu and her father. He looked up to his second father, whose last stand and final words were still firmly imprinted on his mind. The only thing that had changed was that he now understood he hadn't seen every side of Motoharu. Jinya was so focused on following in his second father's footsteps, he hadn't been able to see the man as he was.

What a shame. If only Jinya had realized this sooner, then maybe the chance

to know his father better wouldn't have slipped by.

"I'll leave the payment here."

"Thank you!"

Watching Ofuu tease her father had calmed Jinya's mind some. He was ready now. After paying his bill, he made for Sugaya.

He thought of Jyuuzou on the way there. The two couldn't return to being father and son, but perhaps there was a different form their bond could take, one that'd allow Jinya to know him better before the chance slipped by.

"There is no problem with *Kudanzaka*. The artist called it a demonic picture only because he had some lingering regrets tied to it. It should be safe, both to sell and to own."

Late in the evening, in Jyuuzou's room, Jinya explained the facts of the incident. He left Motoharu's involvement out of the narrative, but Jyuuzou was satisfied with his work, nonetheless.

"What of the death?"

"A coincidence, albeit an unfortunate one. He had the print on him when he died, but the print itself wasn't the cause of his death."

At most, the ukiyo-e print could only be a motive for the murder. There could have been a struggle for the print, or perhaps someone hated Saga Doshu's works to the point of murder, or maybe someone fell in love with the depicted Itsukihime and killed in a moment of passion. All were possible explanations, though each a bit of a stretch.

"A coincidence, huh? That would make sense, since I haven't heard further news involving the picture. I guess misfortune can visit us all." Jinya wondered if he had imagined Jyuuzou's momentary hesitation.

This case was indeed a result of unfortunate coincidence, however. If nobody had died while in possession of the ukiyo-e print, the talk of a demonic picture would never have grown so out of proportion.

"Well done. I'll pay you before you leave. But before that, let's drink,"

Jyuuzou said, ending the topic.

Before Jinya was a tray with some sake, along with snacks that paired well with alcohol. A bit too modest to call a feast, but Jyuuzou had done good on his promise.

“Please, let me pour you a cup.” In place of thanks, Jinya moved to serve him first.

Jyuuzou downed the drink without hesitation, then quietly sighed. “Let me pour you one too.”

Jinya allowed himself to be served, then drank it all as well. The warm liquor felt good gliding down his throat.

The two continued to pour drinks for one another, the room lit by the shaky light of a standing paper lantern. Neither were the talkative sort, so few words were exchanged as they drank.

After some time drinking in silence, Jinya voiced a passing thought of his. “Do you drink often?” In the past, Jyuuzou hadn’t seemed like the drinking type, but the way he acted now seemed so habitual.

“I used to drink to escape my sorrows, but before I knew it I started drinking for pleasure. The taste grew on me.”

Jyuuzou’s brief reply barely explained anything. He didn’t go into further detail, nor look to see Jinya’s reaction. He just tilted his cup back again. “And you? Are you fond of drink?” he asked as he filled Jinya’s cup. The son he knew was still five-year-old Jinta. Perhaps that’s why he asked.

“I am. I like to drink under the moon sometimes.” Drinking while appreciating the moon, a somewhat rare practice, held a particularly significant meaning to Jinya. He didn’t elaborate either though, leaving this meaning lost to Jyuuzou.

Neither pressed the other to explain. They felt no need for it. Some things between them just couldn’t be understood. The time they’d spent apart was too long. They could no longer return to being father and son, and they both knew it.

“How about we drink again sometime?”

Jyuuzou offered, regardless. Even if they couldn't return to what they once were, their bond could take a new shape.

Having only recently grasped that possibility himself, Jinya softly smiled.

"I would be honored to."

Their agreement wouldn't become an empty promise. In the near future, the two would meet again and drink themselves blind as a new incident, one involving liquor, unfolded. But that is a story for another time. For now, they drank not as father and son, nor as client and contractor, but as two ordinary drunkards pouring for one another.

"Good stuff."

Who is to say whose words those were. By this point, the two had drunk too much to tell. Slowly, they let themselves slip deeper into a stupor.

***To be continued in Sword of the Demon Hunter: Kijin Gentōshō - Edo Arc:
Drunken Dreams of Lingering Snow***

Footnotes

- [1.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One shaku is equal to 0.9942 feet.
- [2.](#) A currency used from 1336 to 1870.
- [3.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ken is equal to six shaku.
- [4.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ri is equal to 2.440 miles.
- [5.](#) A historical unit of time measurement that fell out of use after the Edo Period. One koku is roughly equal to two hours. A fourth is roughly equal to thirty minutes.



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